

THE WHIRLPOOL

NOVELS

THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL
MARTIN CROFT
ALVINA FOSTER
COMPASSIONATE ADVENTURE
TOTAL WAR AT HAVERINGTON
WONDERFUL MRS. MARRIOTT

DETECTIVE NOVELS

MURDER IN HOSPITAL
FALL OVER CLIFF
FROM NATURAL CAUSES
DEATH IN CLAIRVOYANCE,
etc.

THE WHIRLPOOL

by

JOSEPHINE BELL



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FOR JIM AND JULIA

CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT TRAIN to the west drew out from the platform at Paddington, running into a silver-grey twilight. It was nearly eleven o'clock, but it was also mid-June, and with an hour of summer-time, besides, to hold off the advance of darkness, the western suburbs seemed rather to be lying in the faint light of a dull afternoon. Few of the houses were lit, even in their lower rooms, since many people were still out of doors; this made a day-time scene even more falsely credible.

Kay Lawson, from her corner seat in a first-class carriage, took note of the light with a little feeling of exasperation. The platform had been suitably gloomy; inside the station all the lights had been on. She had looked forward to a journey without light; to getting rid of the long night in a few hours of darkness and an early dawn. It annoyed her to find the night had not yet begun. Her wished-for darkness was delayed, and by so much would her dawn be late in coming. She sighed and folded her hands in her lap, staring out of the window. In the other corners of the carriage their occupants switched on the reading lamps and opened books or papers.

Kay waited listlessly. Her journey had not begun at Paddington. She had travelled to London in the morning from her home in Sussex; she had visited the hospital where, during the last few years, she had worked successively as a part-time V.A.D., a full-time V.A.D., and, as now, a student nurse; she had met one friend for tea and another for supper. It had been a day crowded with people

and with conversation. A pleasant easy day, rather a relief after a week spent in her own home with parents who found her something of a disappointment, and who underlined their attitude by being considerate without understanding. But it had been a busy day as well, and she discovered now, sitting in the train, that her week's holiday at home had done very little to remove the accumulated tiredness of the past year, of the past eight years, of the war and its calamities, and of the not so different time since the fighting stopped.

She moved restlessly to alter the direction of her thoughts, but did not attempt to read, though she knew that nothing short of this would succeed. If she opened her book her restless thoughts would stop flipping over the album pages of those past years. She would stop seeing the faces of her home circle and of her London friends; she would not have to remind herself to keep the war pages closed. In her book she would be able to escape with a set of pleasant or entertainingly unpleasant characters on their puppet march. But she did not open its covers. She let it slide from her lap into the corner of the carriage seat. Instead of reading she waited with a dull impatience for the darkness that was so slow in coming; for the moment when the other travellers would switch off their lights and settle themselves for uneasy sleep, pulling rugs or greatcoats over their knees and shoulders against the chill of the after-midnight hours. When this time came at last she robed herself as they did, and curled into her corner with her head down on a folded jacket. But her eyes remained open, jerking with the movement of her head in the vibrating train, and watching the stars jig up and down in time with that movement.

In the end she slept fitfully, for intervals that were longer than she knew. It seemed to her that she did not sleep at all. Only at times the carriage and its occupants

expanded into huge darkness, huge noise, across which shadowy pictures of past journeys, like the dim projections of an old-fashioned village cinema, drifted through her mind, disturbing her with their remembered anxieties and griefs. Dennis, six years dead, again clasped her hands on the sharp edge of carriage windows, leaned out to kiss her with desperate finality as the train moved, waved from the corner of a recurring bend, was there again, was gone again, into the great floating expanding darkness and noise. Each time she woke the narrow carriage took back its true proportions, and confined her anew in the life without Dennis to which she was accustomed, and which she believed she had at last accepted. She decided in one of these waking intervals that she had been mad to risk this night journey with its power to evoke memories she had thought stifled. Then she drifted off again, and the next time she awoke found her fellow travellers stirring, and a thin shaft of sunlight glinting on the stems of a row of young poplars near the railway line.

She reached thankfully for her thermos flask, chewed at a very dry sandwich, finished her coffee, and went out into the corridor. There was breakfast on the train for the travellers to Cornwall, but she was leaving it too early to take advantage of this. She saw the cooks busy in their swaying kitchen, and thought idly of their skill. In many of the carriages people still slept, untidily humped bundles of breathing rugs.

When she reached her own carriage again she saw that it was time to gather her things together. The book she had not opened at all lay crushed against the corner into which it had slipped from her knee during the night. She stuffed it into her bag. She felt uncomfortably dirty, but not tired. And she was leaning out of the window smiling and waving to Bob and Judy Howard as the long train came to its first ponderous stop since leaving Plymouth.

"It's going to be a scorcher," said Bob, looking up at the sky from the station yard, where he was holding his car door open for Kay.

She climbed in without answering. Bob and Judy had looked so jolly and unchanged, standing arm in arm on the platform as the train moved slowly past them. Now, at close range, they looked so different; more cautious, more settled; happy, but already taking their happiness for granted; hardening slowly into their mature mould. She remembered sadly that she had not seen them for five years, soon after Judy's first child was born. Then she had taken the office of god-mother almost as a joke, but with a little feeling of respect as well, because she knew that she was really standing proxy for Dennis, who had been Bob's friend. Thinking of this, she remembered the war-time wedding, when Dennis had been Bob's best man. Her half-waking dreams on the train, joining her freshly waked memories, confused her. But she forgot her new impression of her friends and saw them again as they had been, and were no longer.

"You look as fresh as a daisy," said Judy admiringly. "Did you manage to sleep on the way down, or is it all the result of your week at home?"

Kay turned to speak to her, leaning her elbow on the back of the front seat where she sat, and twisting her head round to look full at her friend.

"I didn't sleep; at least it didn't feel like it. But I never could sleep in trains, if you remember."

"No, of course you didn't."

Judy spoke with too much emphasis: it was clear that she had forgotten. She has forgotten it all, Kay thought. We are almost strangers now. But we were always different; Judy was a first-rate Waaf, and I never was any good myself, not efficient, no guts, or I shouldn't have had a breakdown when Dennis went. Plenty of other people had

losses and carried on, and made up for it later, too. Judy made me seem all right till that happened, she always covered up for me. But it wasn't the thing I ought to have done. It wasn't my real job. Have I ever had a real job?

"Done much writing lately?" Bob asked her.

"Not much." She spoke sadly. She was answering her inner question as well. "I lost my connections rather in the war, and now the magazines don't want war stories, and I don't seem to have much else to offer them."

"You must come across oceans of copy in that hospital of yours," said Judy cheerfully. "Sob stuff and tough incidents—I should have thought you'd be turning out short stories like a sausage machine."

"Don't be disgusting," said Kay with a laugh. But she knew that Judy was right. Her material was there, not only in the hospital but everywhere about her, in London, at her home, anywhere, if she chose to let experience ripen. The visual scene, the scrap of overheard conversation, the situation witnessed and grasped intuitively, each and all could be made to grow and expand, plumped out by the watering of her imagination, into a story worth writing. The material was there and so was the gift, small, uncertain, but positive; not great enough to drive her against her will, against her loss of heart and purpose; not great enough to be a purpose of itself; as uncertain, indeed, as the trickle of a narrow stream; but positive as a nagging child pulling on a hand that will not yield to importuning.

To turn the talk away from herself and her failures she began to ask her friends questions about themselves. They were quite willing to tell her everything she had heard already from them in letters, and much more of the sort of things that letters cannot convey. She listened and prompted, while the car buzzed up hills and ran silently down them, or buried itself in leafy lanes where the low morning sun flickered blindingly through the branches as

they passed. They came up at last above the cliffs, where the main coast road followed the sea, dipping a few miles off to a bay fringed with houses. This small town was the end of their journey.

"We might park your bag at your pub and then go straight on to our place," suggested Bob. "Judy has got breakfast practically cooking, I believe—all very highly organised anyway, and you won't get anything to eat at your place till nine."

"It's still barely eight," added Judy. "I'm sure you must be ravenous."

"I feel I ought to start with a bath," said Kay doubtfully.

"Bring the bag then," said Judy, "and bath at the bungalow while I do the breakfast."

"Would you mind? Or shall I bath first and come up to you afterwards?"

The car stopped at the entrance to a small private hotel, which stood behind a little front lawn, with a low stone wall between it and the pavement, and two gaps in the wall to go in by.

"Look," said Bob. "Just slip in and tell them you're here and will be back to dinner—they have it midday on Sunday." He exchanged a glance with Judy, who nodded. "Park your rug and coat and come straight out again."

"Right."

Kay understood the look she had intercepted. She was used to it; the meat ration, especially with two small children in the house, could not be stretched to include strangers, particularly if they were well provided for. She felt more comfortable when she understood that Judy and Bob were treating her as an old friend, and not as an honoured guest for whom unnatural sacrifices had to be made. She clambered out of the car and hurried into the hotel.

A harassed-looking woman with too much make-up and a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, came in answer to Kay's ring. She explained that there was no porter and Kay must carry her own bag as she herself was not allowed to lift weights. This must be a routine defence, Kay thought, since she had left her bag in the car. The woman then gave Kay the number of her room and a key, explaining that she was very lucky to get a bed in the town at all. It was only through a cancellation at the last minute that this room happened to be free when the Howards called. Kay thanked her briefly and went upstairs, the woman leaning back against the staircase to watch her progress.

The rest of the morning passed for Kay in a warm sunlit bewilderment. Her night of travel had linked this day to the one before without the normal break of sleep, and it imposed its barrier of images between herself and the unfamiliar reality of a place she had not before visited. The bright morning, growing hotter every hour as Bob had prophesied, seemed to her an unnatural extension of the afternoon of yesterday, and the crowds, the beach, the sea, even Bob and Judy Howard with their two little girls, swam mistily before her eyes, far away and confused, like the view through the spectacles of a friend with an opposite type of vision. Outwardly she shared their morning, and outwardly enjoyed it. She helped Sally and Prune to dig a sand castle; bathed with them in the shallows, chased them about the beach, and later, while Judy was rubbing them down and putting them into dry sun-suits, swam out to sea with Bob. Here, lying on her back, looking at the cloudless sky, swinging up and down on the long Atlantic waves, she felt free both of the night and of her strangeness, accepting an environment that was all impersonal, which received her, as part of itself, into pure physical enjoyment. But once back on the beach, stretched on her towel and fussed over by Judy with oil for her back and warnings

against too long a first exposure, she felt more removed than ever from actuality, and sleepy as well as tired.

Lunch at the hotel was boring but plentiful. She could not bring herself to talk much, and having finished early, found a deck chair in the garden and a Sunday newspaper. Common sense suggested sleep, but she no longer felt sleepy. The strangeness of the morning was passing. A second afternoon to her long day did not seem so unnatural. Soon there would be a second evening, and then this immense day would be finished, and she would go to a normal rest. She did not want to lie on her bed now, in the blaze of early afternoon. It would be much too hot; she would wake late in the evening, sticky and bad-tempered. She read her newspaper with attention. She felt braced for effort.

Bob and Judy came for her soon after three. They had another man with them. Kay watched the three walking towards her across the hotel lawn. The stranger walked between her two friends. He was a little taller than Judy but much shorter than Bob.

"About my height," Kay said to herself.

She noticed the smooth, rather long dark hair, lean brown face, and quick-moving eyes. He spoke to Judy as they came nearer and all three laughed. It was the kind of laugh that was the answer to an indecent story; he had evidently told it well, with just the right expression and timing. A phrase came into Kay's mind, ready-made, unbidden, compelling her attention.

"Who is this little mountebank?"

Then the three were within speaking distance and Judy said:

"My dear, this is Roger Monkhouse. Kathleen Lawson, only we call her Kay."

They smiled at one another and each felt the meeting was easy and friendly. Roger's curiosity, always greedy, demanded to know more of her.

"I'm staking a claim on Bob and Judy for the afternoon," he said. "I came to make my apologies. But I should like to extend the claim, if I may."

"Kay was on the night train," said Bob. "I fully expected to find her in bed."

"I'm not a bit sleepy," said Kay, truthfully. "After that bathe this morning I feel ready for anything."

She looked at Roger. He had his face turned from her and she saw his profile, watching it with the admiration it usually excited. She saw too that the lines of his face were cut deep, that in repose it wore a sad but gentle expression, and that his dark hair was streaked with grey at the sides. He was older than he had appeared as he walked laughing on the lawn between her two friends. Older, and distinctly interesting. She was shocked to remember her first spontaneous summing up. These ready-made pronouncements often came to her, seeming to over-ride her more considered judgment. She usually rejected them as imaginative nonsense, with the uneasy afterthought that in the end she often found them brilliantly true. She rejected this one, prepared to treat it as the final proof of their unreliability; blaming her writer's thirst for words and phrases.

"O.K.," said Bob. "Come along."

Kay put her newspaper back in the hotel lounge, fetched a cardigan in case she should need it later, attended swiftly to her face, and ran down again into the garden. Roger was standing there alone, the profile turned now to the sky where some gulls were quarrelling over a lump of bread one of them held in its beak. The other hotel guests in the garden were watching Roger. Kay, noticing this, was amused and subtly flattered.

"They have gone to collect some buns for your tea," he said, guiding her gently out on to the road, "so I said we would go ahead."

"Where to?" Kay asked. She was quite content, wherever it might be. Roger laughed.

"How charmingly agreeable you sound," he said. "Do you really not mind particularly where you go?"

"I'm on holiday," said Kay, laughing in her turn. "I think the nicest thing about a holiday is to let things happen to you and enjoy them."

"A sound philosophy for life in general," he said, looking full at her, "not only for holidays."

"You can't always do it," said Kay, equally seriously.

"I think you could," he said, smiling, with a return of his first social manner.

They walked on a little way in silence. Kay was surprised at the ease with which she had spoken. She was a shy person, seldom confiding to strangers her real thoughts.

"You still haven't said where we're going," she reminded him after a few minutes more.

"To the camp. I run a boys' holiday camp here from June to September. Fresh lots every three or four weeks. They come down on recommendations from London clubs. The rest of the year I'm a sort of warden for a large group of clubs run by the universities. I used to live at one of them and look after it, but they've promoted me since the war. I don't think I do nearly as much work now as I used to."

"But you're much more important," said Kay.

He smiled, without looking round at her. His profile, smiling, was very attractive. Kay laughed happily to herself.

"Poor man," she thought, "he can't help being so handsome. And he isn't very tall, or very young any more. I don't suppose he notices what an effect he has on people, or else he's used to it."

She was wrong in this, because Roger enjoyed admiration very much indeed. He had no great opinion of his intellectual gifts, though these were considerable, but he

never belittled his personal beauty, regarding it with a wholly feminine seriousness. In this he was justified, because he had proved its worth on many occasions, and owed more, in reaching his present position, to his looks and charm than to his other qualities. To accept in a childlike and uncomplicated manner an undoubted excellence can hardly be called vanity, and as such Kay never regarded it, even when later it became for her less a subject for laughter than for terror.

"Are you a chairman of a committee or a board or something?" she persisted. She wanted to hear him describe his function himself.

"No. Nothing so elevated. Just a sort of sanitary inspector, really. I visit clubs and find out what they need."

"And get it for them?"

"Sometimes, if my bosses allow me."

His modesty was delightful. Kay found herself wishing passionately that he should have at all times whatever he desired.

Presently they reached the camp, a semi-permanent affair of huts with a central gymnasium in brick.

"An old drill hall belonging to the Territorials," explained Roger. "They used to camp here, in the huts and under canvas, up to the war. We took it over afterwards, as they were not going to use the site again. It was derelict all through the war; it needed a lot of cleaning up. The Town Council were not altogether in favour of having us. They were rather put off by their experience with evacuees. But in the end it saved them having to fit up the huts for squatters, so we got it."

"Oh, I see," Kay said. "What a stingy Council! You weren't here in the war, then?"

"Well, no. The boys were evacuated in billets all over the shop. We didn't get started again until after they went back to their homes in London."

"Of course. How stupid of me. You couldn't have. You must have been in the army or something in the war."

He gave her a quick look, acknowledging her paramount interest in his own relation to the camp. But he did not pursue the subject of his war service, and soon they reached the gymnasium. He held open the door for her, and followed her inside.

Bob and Judy joined them almost at once.

"We saw you from the gate," said Judy, "and Bob yelled quite loudly, but you didn't seem to hear, either of you."

"I was being told about the camp," said Kay, careful not to look in Roger's direction. When, after a minute or two, she did turn round, he was no longer near her. A group of boys under the platform stage at the end of the hall surrounded him, all talking at once, laughing, pressing about him, eager for his attention, but ready at once to obey him when he raised both arms in comic protest.

As soon as they were quiet he explained what he wanted, and the boys set about their rehearsal.

"It's a theatrical competition," Judy explained to Kay. "The huts join in pairs to get up a scene from a play, anything they like, which they choose themselves. They can write their own script if they like. The original scenes are judged separately from the pieces taken from real plays. So are variety acts and musicals. They have a prize for each section. There are about fourteen huts altogether, with ten or twelve boys to a hut, so the competition is quite a show. The individual items mustn't last more than fifteen minutes. The town come, and the tickets make a bit of money for charities, after paying expenses. They run it two nights following, and Roger gets a theatrical star or reviewer or some kind of celebrity to do the judging on the first night, and they give out prizes on the second. The boys begin getting it up their first week, and Roger

rehearses them all in turn once, quite impartially, a few days before the performance. He says he gets the best shows if the weather is bad and they have to stay around the camp. Sometimes they can hardly be bothered to do it at all, though there are generally a few huts that are keen."

While Bob was finding chairs and carrying them nearer to the stage another group of boys began to press in through the door. They were booed by those already in possession, but stayed grinning in the doorway. The actors on the stage, who were already speaking their parts, left off, moving in a body to the front of the platform, where they gesticulated in a menacing way. Roger walked briskly to the door, smiling as he went. The boys there laughed as he reached them.

"I was late," he explained, waving his hand round vaguely to include Kay and her friends. "All my fault. But these chaps must have their rehearsal. Hang about for twenty minutes, do you mind? I won't let them run on. And you might spend the time warning the next lot. You shall have your full twenty minutes each. We could cut down the tea interval. Do you mind circulating the news, Len? I'm terribly sorry. I ran into these friends of mine and took much too long to get back. O.K., Len?"

"O.K., sir."

The rehearsals went on with bewildering rapidity. Roger sat a little apart from the three visitors, his face lifted to the stage, his hands clasped round one knee, the script slipping off the other. He interrupted very seldom, but when he made a suggestion or a criticism it was obviously just what was needed to pull the sketch or scene into shape and give it its true significance.

"He seems to know a lot about production," whispered Kay to Judy.

"Started on the stage, I believe," she whispered back.

"Oh."

Kay looked at him with renewed interest. Obviously a man of talent, and of culture. Was it a social urge, a vocation, that had led him to his present work? She was already so much impressed by his power over the boys, and by the clear driving force that communicated itself indirectly through them to her, that she was puzzled. A man of talent, with a living flame in him. Why had he not risen to the heights of his chosen profession? That the talent was inferior she could not believe from his present judgments. Unless he could interpret better than he could perform. But then he should surely have been a producer of the highest rank.

"He had some sort of illness," went on Judy, and stopped as one set of boys left the platform and the rehearsal broke up for tea.

Kay had no time then to consider her friend's last remark. A crowd of boys jostled one another round the tea urn, snatching at the plates of buns that had been brought in by five of their number. They moved aside as she reached the outskirts of the group, and touched by their instant polite thoughtfulness, she took charge of the urn and began to pour out for them, doing the work nimbly and easily with the assurance of a nurse supplying her ward of twenty beds.

"This won't do," said Roger Monkhouse's voice from the edge of the crowd. She looked up, her face flushed with stooping to the urn, her eyes shining. Roger smiled at her; he thought she looked very fresh and charming, though she was evidently no longer quite a girl. His unfailing sense of beauty led him direct to the sensitive simplicity that was at once her most valuable quality and her most dangerous limitation. He allowed himself to enjoy his perception by continuing to watch her.

His remark had had its effect. A little confused by his interruption and at the same time flattered by it, Kay became careless, taking her eyes from the tap of the urn

and the mug in her hand: the tea fell on to the floor, and the circle of boys swayed and shouted and laughed.

"You mustn't distract me," she said gaily, bending again to her work. "Look, I'll give you some tea to occupy you. You ought to need it."

She handed the filled mug to the nearest boy, who handed it on. Monkhouse took it obediently, winking at the boy who served him. A very happy atmosphere grew about the tea-urn. When the boys had all moved away Kay took her own cup and went to sit with her friends. She noticed that Roger had taken his tea to the door of the hut, and was looking out into the open. The profile was calm, and with the lines wiped out by distance, more handsome than ever.

Bob and Judy took Kay away some time before the end of the rehearsals. She had only a week, they said, and must get as much fresh air as possible. Besides, the sun was beginning to go down and it was getting cool enough outside to walk in comfort. So they marched her along the top of the cliffs for half an hour and only returned her to her hotel when Judy had to collect her two little girls from the friend who had looked after them for her during the afternoon.

Kay went to her room to write a postcard to her mother. She took so long over it, though she wrote only two lines announcing her safe arrival, that the hotel supper gong stopped her progress to the post as she was walking out of the front door.

"It won't go tonight in any case," said one of the other guests, watching her hesitate. "And they get very peeved if you're late for a meal, especially on Sunday."

"Then I won't bother about it till afterwards," Kay said, and went quietly away to the far end of the dining room to avoid having to start an acquaintance she did not in the least desire.

She was beginning to feel very tired indeed, with the numbing blanketing tiredness that sometimes came upon

her after a particularly busy day at the hospital. She ate in silence, hardly answering her neighbours' advances; they thought her odd and ill-mannered and soon gave up their attempts at friendliness. The thirty-six hours of her day hung upon her like a heavy cloak that was caught fast in the brambles of its many incidents. She could not free herself of their clinging impediment. For her mind moved slowly, and she found herself making conscious deliberate efforts to perform the simple tasks of eating, drinking, and even breathing. The remedy, sleep, was easily come by, no further off than her room, but she had no energy to curtail her meal, nor, when it had come to an end at last, to give up her intention of posting her card at the pillar box, visible ten yards down the road.

She walked slowly to the open window of the dining room and stood looking out. Roger Monkhouse was passing the hotel. She raised her hand, holding the card, and though his face had been turned from her, he jumped easily and at once over the low wall at the edge of the pavement and came across the grass to her, with his friendly amused smile wrinkling the corners of his fine eyes.

"So the Howards have gone home?"

"Yes."

"Can I post that for you?"

She looked at him gratefully.

"Oh, could you? It ought to go. I was trying to get up enough energy to take it myself, but I feel almost too tired to move."

"The night train. Of course. I forgot. You shouldn't have stayed so long at the rehearsal."

"I enjoyed it."

"Did you? They're keen, this batch. One or two have ideas. I leave it to them, you know."

"Except for showing them the absolutely vital part of what they should do."

He laughed in a self-deprecatory manner.

"Come again tomorrow if you like. Same time, only I don't advise you to stay for the whole of it. You missed the star turn today. It should come on about five o'clock tomorrow."

"I'd love to. I'll try to remember, but I don't think I'm registering any more. I feel I might go to sleep on my feet any minute. I'm just hopelessly tired."

He looked full into her eyes, intent and solicitous; then took the postcard from her hand.

"Yes," he said, "you look it. Good night."

"Good night. Thank you for posting that."

Very soon afterwards Kay was in bed, pulling the bed-clothes about her, stretching slowly to feel the delight of lying down at last, of having her eyes closed, her head sinking into a soft pillow. It was pure joy to stop all effort, to let her thoughts dissolve into unknowing, and best of all to look forward to a morrow that held, for the first time for many years, the promise of no fear, no pain, no intolerable loneliness.

"I've got a date," she told herself, deliberately reducing this swelling of the heart to slangy understatement.

Drifting happily into sleep she said to herself, "Everything is going to be all right," and then, in a lingering doubt, because so little had been right for her in the last six years, "Let me have a new break! Oh, please, give me a new break!"

It was a prayer, though she had no god to whom she prayed. Her sleep had all the abandonment of prayer.

CHAPTER II

THE HOTEL where Kay Lawson was staying stood on a road bordered chiefly by small hotels and lodging houses. This road ran parallel with the beach, but removed from it by a steep hill, closely built over, at the bottom of which lay the main street of the town. From her bedroom window, which faced the sea, she looked down across the roofs of houses, and across their small gardens, to the upper storeys of the shops in the main street. Beyond this there were more roofs showing the mellow tiles of the old town, and beyond these again, the sea. To right and left of her window she saw the same geography repeated. In fact the whole town lay in the shallowest part of the cup formed by the bay. It was neatly contained within the brim, neither spilling over into the high countryside to the landward of the coast road, nor, by reason of the rocky cliffs at the sides of the bay, able to expand outside their confines. This compact appearance was pleasing to Kay, whose opinion of seaside towns had been formed by too many contacts with the sprawling fringe of the south-eastern summer resorts, as miscellaneous and haphazard in their formation as the rubbish left at high water by the retreating tide.

Standing at her window, clear-witted after ten hours of dreamless sleep, she saw with pleasure that another day of sunshine had begun. The sky over the roofs was a clear blue; the sea beyond them looked calm. She dressed quickly, putting on her favourite shirt, beach shorts, and sandals. She was surprised to see how clear her eyes looked in the mirror. A week of this particular sea air might strip

all the haggard lines from her face as well. Why had she drifted for so long between London and her home in Sussex? Not for want of being told by her friends that a complete change was the thing she needed. She had simply not cared enough what became of her; until Matron's warnings, and her own deadly tiredness, and a kind of inward compulsion more positive than fear, but equally uncontrolled, had driven her to write to the Howards and to follow them to the place of their long-arranged holiday. Bless them, she thought, for their continued friendship. She ran down to breakfast on the first stroke of the gong, determined to prove to them as soon as possible how very grateful she felt.

A young post-war couple with small children and no domestic staff gives many opportunities for a demonstration of gratitude. On reaching her friends' bungalow soon after her meal Kay found Judy in the kitchen filling the wash tub with Monday's pile of dirty clothes, while Bob stood near her taking down instructions for the shopping on the back of an envelope.

"Don't interrupt the briefing," he called to her as she walked in.

"I couldn't get the washing done at the laundry under a fortnight," explained Judy, stirring soapflakes into the water. "And we simply haven't got enough clothes to make that one work."

"Can't I help?" offered Kay.

"Certainly not."

"Can't I do anything?"

"You can entertain Sally and Prune," said their father hopefully. "They're absolute hell on a shopping tour, and they'll start clamouring long before Judy's through with this lot."

"Shall I take them down to the beach?"

"Could you bear to?"

"I'd love it."

The two little girls were collected, given dry towels and dry bathers, and the shore party set off. Prunella, the younger, who was only two and a half, and whose legs were too short and too stout for prolonged walking, rode in a push-chair. The towels rode with her.

"This isn't the way to the beach," said Sally, after a few minutes of silent walking.

"No. I want to go back to my hotel to get my own bathing things."

"Why didn't you bring them with you?"

"I didn't think of it."

"Why didn't you think of it?"

"Because I was thinking about what a nice day it is, and that I would walk up to your bungalow as soon as I'd finished my breakfast."

"Is it a nice day?"

"Don't you think so?"

"I don't like the sun to be too hot. It burned Prune's back the first week we came."

"Burned Prune's back," repeated Prunella, dragging down the strap of her sunbathing suit to expose her fat little chest. She twisted round, trying to see the back of her neck, and the towels fell out of the push-chair on to the path. Sally laughed.

"She's trying to see her back," she explained to Kay. "She can't, can she?"

"None of us can."

"None of us can, Prune," Sally told her kindly. "I hate the sun," she added.

"Oh, you can't," Kay was shocked. "It's lovely."

"It's too hot, it burns," repeated Sally. She wriggled and skipped up and down beside her sister.

Kay walked on, stopping at the hotel to collect her bathing dress and her camera, and again in the town to

buy some sweets. She would have liked to buy buns too, to eat after bathing, but her landlady had got her ration book, and she could not do this.

The little town was full of visitors, a few purposefully hunting food, the great majority merely looking at the shops and allowing themselves the luxury of buying a few unneeded trifles simply because they were attracted by them. All the newsagents and stationers were full of people buying picture postcards, maps, string bags, newspapers, magazines, paper-backed thrillers, writing blocks and other accessories of holiday life. Kay's companions helped her to buy some postcards to send to her friends, and accepted a brightly coloured one each to keep for herself. Sally picked out a fawn-coloured puppy with its tongue, in bright scarlet, hanging out of its mouth and a spotted bow in blue and yellow at the side of its head, and Prune chose a row of bright yellow fluffy chickens in various exaggerated attitudes. They both seemed well pleased with their choice, which Kay thought deplorable. All three spent a very long time in coming to their several decisions, and the morning was well advanced by the time they left the shops to walk down the winding road to the old harbour, where there were steps leading to the sands.

On the way they saw Bob Howard, looking sternly at the fish on a fishmonger's slab. The children yelled to him, but he was too much absorbed in his work to hear. Kay also noticed a good many boys in the familiar khaki shirts and shorts of the camp. Some were shopping with large bags, others were looking into shop windows. Roger Monkhouse was not with them.

Kay observed this fact calmly. Before her stretched the rest of the morning, the quiet afternoon, and the evening with its rehearsal. Since this ultimate goal was fixed, she had no sense of uncertainty, nor of impatience. She tasted anticipation with the most delicate pleasure, and wondered

at her renewed power to do so. She did not reflect that, to the imaginative, the delights of early acquaintance are seldom equalled, hardly ever excelled, by later intimacy; holding, as they do, an unflowered bud, whose smooth surface gives no hint of possible decay.

At all events Kay Lawson, on this clear summer's day, lazily sprawled in the soft warm sand above the tidemark, had no misgiving, saw no portents. She watched her charges running aimlessly about the level beach towards the sea, enjoying, as small children do unendingly, the feel of sand under their toes; she lay on her back with a newspaper over her face and head, letting the hot sun soak into her; and when Sally, approaching on tiptoe with a bucket of sand to pour on her, was betrayed by Prune's fat giggle, she sat up, blinking the light out of her eyes, saying, "No, you don't! Who wants a bathe? Who wants a swim?" and feeling that it was a truly perfect morning. She ran down to the sea with a child holding each of her hands, singing to herself, "A perfect morning, a perfect morning! The most perfect morning I've ever known!"

Judy Howard found her, still in her bathing dress, on hands and knees, patting the outer walls of a castle she was helping Sally and Prune to build. The children began at once a defensive verbal attack, in which Kay joined them. Judy gave way, and the party did not leave the beach until a flag made of newspaper was flying from the castle keep, and water, fetched from the sea, had been poured into the moat, where it promptly vanished through the sand.

"Are you coming along for tennis this afternoon?" Judy asked as they arrived at the place where their ways separated.

"I'd love to. What time?"

"After tea, don't you think? It'll be sweltering earlier."

"I'm supposed to be going to the rehearsal after tea."

"What rehearsal? Oh, at the camp? Did Roger ask you?"

"Yes."

"My dear, you must have made an impression. He's by way of being a confirmed bachelor. Or so they say down here; he doesn't appear to brag about it himself. At least, I've never heard him."

Kay flushed, but kept smiling.

"That wouldn't prevent him speaking to women now and then, I suppose? Or even having women friends, would it? Not necessarily, I mean?"

"You think he's a dark horse? Perhaps with an exotic mistress in London? I'll find out if Bob agrees with you."

"Judy, you're not to do any such thing! I never even suggested . . . Of all the low minds . . ."

Judy looked at her friend with raised eyebrows. Kay was most unusually vehement; she looked quite pretty. With some amusement she decided that impressions had been made on both sides. What fun! And what a good thing for poor old Kay, after all these years of moping. Judy felt an urgent need to discuss the situation with Bob.

"Oh, hell, look at the time! These two must be ravening. Come up after supper, then. We shall both want to hear about the rehearsal. Cheeroh!"

But late that evening Kay found that she had nothing to tell her friends about the rehearsal. She satisfied their curiosity as well as she was able. Judy was inclined to be angry.

"Do you mean to say he kept you trying on the boys' costumes all the time, and altering them, or mending them?"

"Most of the time. The boys were terribly grateful. They usually have to do it for themselves, and don't get very good results, especially with the women's clothes. My helping them meant they had extra time for actual rehearsal too, because they didn't have to consult Roger about their difficulties."

"Didn't you mind?"

"Of course not. Why should I? It was rather nice of them to ask me, I thought. Rather an honour. Boys of that age don't generally want unknown females butting in on their concerns."

"They would accept you as a friend of Roger's, I suppose. They worship him, you know. They'd do anything for him. I think he's quite wonderful with them. Don't you, Bob?"

Bob Howard grunted into his pipe, but did not bother to take it out of his mouth. It was impossible to know what his answer had been.

Afterwards, sitting at the open window of her hotel bedroom, Kay went over the rehearsal in her mind, living through that happiness with the added joy of its final moments.

"Well, that's that. The end of a perfect day."

"It has been a perfect day, hasn't it?"

"And the end of rehearsals, thank God."

She had felt an instant catch at her heart, for the end of a beginning.

"Doing anything special tomorrow afternoon?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I thought we might walk out to Springstead. It's a small village on the edge of the moors. About two and a half miles inland. They give you tea in a cottage garden. Or do you have to stick around here on the beach with the Howards?"

"No, I'd love to come. Thanks very much."

"Right. I'll fetch you from your pub about three. O.K.?"

"Yes, thank you."

Almost she had heard a burst of trumpets, celebrating a victory.

But that was not the whole of the rehearsal. There had been more than the pleasant work of the wardrobe and the triumphant close. There had been the moment of insight,

when her writer's observation had turned upon a seemingly trivial incident, lighting it with uncomfortable clarity.

One of the groups had chosen to do the banquet scene from Macbeth. It was easy to see why. The leader of the cast was a natural actor who had seized his opportunity with vigour, choosing a part very well suited to his powers. He spoke verse easily and well, and he understood how to time his words and his phrases so that he could be heard at the end of the gymnasium without apparently raising his voice. He fitted easy, natural movements to the words, and he did not over-act.

This was the boy Roger had spoken of the night before, and Kay had no difficulty in understanding why he had been enthusiastic about him. His talent stood out boldly from the conscientious mumbling and awkward gestures of his friends. Almost too boldly, Kay thought, from the point of view of the competition, which was to be judged, above all, for team-work and team achievement. But as the scene developed she remembered that it was, after all, written that way. Macbeth dominates his followers, and overawes them, as much by his strangeness as by his ability and recent feats of arms. In the banquet scene his terrifying behaviour begins to drive them from their allegiance. They are silenced and confused, while Macbeth, with a self-absorbed indifference and detachment that makes the blood run cold, pursues his phantoms and his fears. Shakespeare himself sustained the boy's astonishing superiority over his fellow actors.

At the end of the scene the players left the stage and gathered about Kay while one of their number handed round the costumes they had already secured from the camp's theatrical wardrobe. Macbeth alone seemed uninterested, for he kept turning away to look across the hall, and did not hear when Kay spoke to him.

Presently Roger Monkhouse joined their group and the

boy's preoccupation was explained. Kay saw his face change, taking on again the glow it had held while he was on the stage. He was a very tall boy, about seventeen, with large bony hands and thick untidy hair. Roger laid a hand lightly on his arm, turning him to face Kay.

"Vic Stevens, our future Richardson," he said. "Don't you agree?"

"I certainly do."

The boy flushed, not, as Kay saw, at her agreement, but wholly at Roger's praise. She could not bear to look at the shining worship in his eyes, fixed on Roger. She turned away, then with a pang she did not recognise as jealousy, turned back. The boy, Victor, had his big hands on Roger's shoulders, and the latter was looking at him with pleased affection. When his eyes met Kay's however, across the boy's shoulder, this expression faded, leaving a blank defensive stare. He moved, so that Victor's hands dropped from his shoulders, stretched out his own hand, and with a gentle mocking smile, tweaked the boy's nose, patted his shoulder, and walked away. Victor, now scarlet in the face, but smiling idiotically, moved off in the opposite direction.

All the old explanations, the old arguments, the conventional attack and defence of either side, came back to Kay as she sat in her window. During her years in the services, and since then at the hospital, she had lost sight of the eternal school problems. She had lived with adults, and the struggles and importunities of adolescence had faded into the past of her own school life. But now, in this camp of boys controlled by men, they were all revived to disturb her. Now they touched her personally. Roger's work, which she already idealised, presented itself to her in a more complex form. She saw him steering a steady course through the muddy waters of adolescent manhood by which he was surrounded. He was quite competent to succeed. She had no doubt of that. If on the day before she

had found in him a living flame, today she had perceived a resistance of steel, so tempered with kindness that its ruthless strength was less apparent than implied. While her fervent admiration for Roger grew, enthroning him in her heart, and her natural modesty, in so lifting him up, set her down from a place at his side to the lowest step of the dais, at the same time she could not help feeling a more genuine and less histrionic wave of pity for the boy. There was no denying the honest force of this emotion. It swamped the other, against her wish, against her idealisation of the man. She was sorry for the boy because he was in danger, because he was going to be hurt.

"Nonsense," she told herself angrily. "Roger is the most understanding person I have ever met,—except Dennis—more perhaps, in some ways—he knows more—he is so much older. He handled Vic the only way you can handle that sort of thing—made light of it, cheerfully and with affection."

She undressed and went to bed, elevated by thoughts of the happiness in store for her the next afternoon, but still indulging her solicitude for Vic Stevens, and this because she felt herself to be secure on the steps of the throne.

CHAPTER III

KAY WOKE EARLY the next morning. She lay with her face turned to the window, her eyes half open, lazily watching the blown wisps of cloud crossing the roof tops. There had been a strong wind in the night, which had disturbed her now and then ; today the early morning was clear and the sun shone, but these clouds showed her, even if she did not listen to the humming telegraph wires, that a wind still blew.

She tried to sleep again, but found she could not. She was charged with the restlessness of a newcomer to sea air; first this outpouring of energy, then the period of sleepy engorgement, then the return to normal living. She knew the stages, but it was so long since she had visited the sea—all the war years lay between her and her last holiday on the coast—that she had forgotten them. She knew only that she could not sleep again, though it was barely seven, and that she must get up and go to the beach.

The cold wind, blowing across the water, met her in full gale on the old harbour road. She put her head down to meet it and pushed on, passing no one on the way, and turning off thankfully at the steps leading down to the sand. A hundred yards or so to the right a pile of rock lay close under the cliff. She made for this and sat under the lee of it, where she was sheltered from the wind and warmed by the sun. She hung her towel about her shoulders for extra warmth while she considered her bathe. In her battle with the wind she had given no thought to anything else, but now she looked at the sea for the first time, and as she

did so she felt the recurrent shock and tingling delight with which supreme beauty assails the senses.

The sea was at half-tide, coming in. It had been whipped up by the night's wind into great waves, that advanced, as only Atlantic waves do, in regular long-spaced lines. These broke thunderously on the hard sand, but their spume, caught and blown by the gusty wind, was tossed up and turned back upon them. The white light of the early sun, falling on this wind-spun mist of spume, made an iridescent veil behind which the waves mounted and fell. Kay, watching the shimmering brittle vapour advance across the sand, and the air over the whole beach as far as she could see dancing in its white light, sat entranced, losing herself in an ecstasy that surpassed any she had known before.

Three figures moved between her and the water. She was so bemused and blinded by the beauty she had seen that she did not recognise them, until one of them spoke to give her good morning. Then she saw that it was the boy from the camp, that Victor who was playing Macbeth in the banquet scene.

"Good morning," she answered politely, and smiled.

Victor stopped, while his companions moved on.

"Aren't you coming in? We've got a couple of surf boards. It ought to be wizard for surfing this morning."

Hearing his normal voice, with its slightly off-accent, Kay was reminded of his excellent speaking in his part, and wondered vaguely where he had learned his elocution. For the natural voice was plainly suburban, differing from the prevalent cockney of the other boys, but full of the slipshod roughness and mispronunciations of a speech midway between dialect and a cultivated tongue. She wondered which of the London suburbs was his home, and whether he was by himself at the camp, or had come with friends. She wondered if he had known Roger Monkhouse before

the war, then smiled to herself, remembering that the boy was only seventeen now. He answered both her questions without her putting them.

"Those chaps are from my school. Near Wandsworth Common. We came last year too."

The other boys stood at a distance and shouted. Victor looked at them, hesitating.

"You'd better not keep them waiting," Kay said, to help him to put an end to their conversation. But his difficulty was not of manners.

"I wish I'd come alone," he said frankly. "It looks too darned cold with all that spray about."

"Oh, you'll have to go in," said Kay. "Look, I'll make an effort too, if you'll show me how to use a surf board. I never have."

She waited after Victor had gone, not wishing to force herself on the boy after he had rejoined his own companions, and thinking he would perhaps find her an embarrassing pupil. But presently when she had watched the three of them surf-riding for a little while, she took off her shirt and shorts, which she was wearing over her bathing dress, pushed her hair under a cap, and ran down to the sea.

The boys were kind and helpful, though they laughed a great deal at her more unsuccessful attempts. But the management of a surf board needs practice and judgment, and as Kay had neither, she found more exercise than enjoyment, and gave it up after a strenuous fifteen minutes, which had been spent almost entirely under water.

The sun was warm in the shelter of the rocks, but she felt too cold to lie about in a wet bathing dress, and soon was dressed again, rubbing her hair which had not been very well protected by her cap. While she was doing this Victor came up to her and lay down in the sun, the water shining on his brown chest. He was breathing hard.

"That was grand," he said. "You did fine."

"I did hopelessly badly," she laughed. "That board had a devil in it. It kicked every time I got properly on to it."

"You haven't quite got the knack of the timing."

"I should say I haven't!"

She laughed and the boy laughed too. He rolled over to dry his back in the sun, looking sideways at her with his face in the crook of his arm.

"Mr. Monkhouse doesn't bathe early?" Kay asked in a casual voice.

"He's too busy getting the breakfast squad going. He works damned—sorry—very hard, you know."

"I'm sure he does."

"He never seems to take time off for himself. He's always around if anyone wants him. He's a marvellous chap."

Kay took her eyes from his young infatuated face; she found it both pathetic and indecent. But the boy's voice still assailed her. It was unnaturally distinct, even aggressive.

"My Dad doesn't live with us—with Mum and me, I mean. He pushed off when I was twelve. Mum lives on a separation allowance and my uncle pays for my education and grudges every penny of it. At least he's always on at me for not showing him enough gratitude, whatever he means by that."

Kay nodded. She was touched. He was trying to explain to her, in this roundabout defiant way, why Roger Monkhouse meant so much to him. He must know, with the jealous hypersensitive intuition of a lover, that Monkhouse had paid her some special notice. She hoped he would go on talking about himself, and waited, idly throwing pebbles towards the advancing waves.

"I joined the club to get away from home. Mum never seems to be lonely. There's a lot of women come in to talk to her, a lot of the neighbours. They always talk about the same thing—Dad, and the way he walked out on us. I can't

stand it. That's another thing Uncle creates about; says this club is for the working classes, and I ought not to be in it, as he pays for me to go to the Grammar. So what?"

"I don't think class counts for anything much these days," said Kay. "It certainly didn't in the Services, except that they gave you rather a bad time if they thought you were educated."

"They didn't give us a bad time at the club," said Victor. "I go there a lot. That's why I came on one of the camp parties last year and the year before. I wouldn't miss it now for ten hundred thousand lousy uncles."

He sat up, rubbing the dried sand off his chest.

"You're going to Springstead today, aren't you?"

She turned her head slowly to look at him. So that was the real reason why he had come over to speak to her, and had told her about his family. He accepted her as in some way Roger's property. He felt that in confiding in her he was fixing himself more securely in Roger's orbit. But how did he know? Why had he been told?

"Yes," she told him. "Mr. Monkhouse wants to show me the village."

"It's a favourite spot of his. He took me once."

Kay heard this without enthusiasm, then laughed at herself. Why shouldn't Roger have his show-place to bring his new friends to? Didn't everyone have a show place and a show topic to lay before each new friend? Her own were books and the ballet and the Sussex Downs. That was where she had taken Dennis in the early days. And he had taken her to the mountains of Wales. She always took people to the South Downs. There was the Medical Registrar at the hospital in her first year there; at her suggestion, after he had taken her dancing, they had spent a Sunday on the Downs near Lewes. Only he had left the hospital soon after that, and had not written to her. She wondered if, when Roger was in London again in the autumn, they would go

to look at the Sussex Downs. She told herself not to be a fool.

"Then you have been to the cottage tea-garden, I suppose? I have been told to expect something special there."

"It's wizard."

Kay looked at her watch. She had every excuse for leaving him.

"I must get back to my hotel. I'm so hungry after that bathe I couldn't bear to miss breakfast."

She got up, collecting her wet bathing things off the rock where she had spread them, and looking round the beach at the same time.

"Your friends seem to have deserted you."

He scrambled up to look too, flushing a little as he saw the empty beach with his small bundle of clothes lying some distance away, a stone holding them down. He made off at a run, not taking leave of her. Kay walked thoughtfully back to the hotel.

She felt lazy after breakfast, and so decided to wait for an hour or so before going up to the Howards' bungalow. The beauty of the sea on the beach that morning had stirred her imagination, so that ideas ran freely in her mind and she knew they would presently agglutinate into a story. For the first time since her break-down it would not be a war story. She was vaguely excited about it, but she knew she must not force the pace. When it was ready it would arrive. Unlike writing itself, which was a labour of translation, and could be entered upon at any time, her themes and characters had first to be arranged in the unconscious depths of her mind. While they hid themselves she had no control over them. Outwardly now she read a newspaper, but for every paragraph she saw and understood, six floated unread across her inattentive mind. When at last she gave up her flagging effort to absorb the news, and walked to the

bungalow, she found it empty. Rather than follow her friends to the beach, whose magic would surely have been dissipated by the mounting sun and the thronging crowds, she went back to the hotel garden to stretch herself in the shade of a garden umbrella and continue her brooding without interruption.

She was silent on the first part of her walk that afternoon. Roger was punctual, but she was ready beforehand, not wanting to keep him waiting. She noticed that he wore freshly pressed grey flannels, and a tweed jacket new enough not to have leather reinforcements on the sleeves. She wondered, as she always did, why men thought it necessary to wear a coat for convention's sake, however hot it was likely to make them. It was a dying formality, but Roger observed it, probably because he came of the generation that grew up in the late nineteen-twenties. Whatever a man's face looked like, you could tell his age from the way he wore his clothes and the way he danced. She had not danced with Roger yet, but she thought it would be in the close-held, cheek-to-cheek, cramped-step type of dancing of the early 'thirties.

Roger watched her, interested and rather amused by her apparent inattention. He was a person used to defer to his own moods, but he was not accustomed to find a companion preoccupied. He did not try to break into her thoughts because he expected her to divulge them when she was ready. People never failed to confide in him. Besides, he found it very restful and pleasant, after the vigorous noise of the camp, to walk beside this light, graceful figure, to see her large dreamy grey-green eyes move slowly across the moors ahead, to watch the sun finding lights in the dull gold of her hair. She was not beautiful, nor even pretty, but he was struck again by a quality of singleness, an elegance that owed nothing to artifice, a simplicity less of the mind than of the spirit. It satisfied his

sense of beauty, pleased his deep acquisitiveness, stimulated his rampant curiosity.

"Moors are lovely at this time of the year," Kay said at last, not looking at him, but letting her eyes continue to range over the distance on either side of their footpath. "The colour is so wonderful. Better than the downs; they get rather drab in the summer when the grass has dried off, though I never get tired of the line of the hills, or of walking along the top, with the weald on one side and the sea on the other. The sea is wonderful, too, and a great change from heavy dark green trees, like the ones all round our house in Sussex. But you get tired of the sea—or frightened of it."

She paused, and he could not resist guiding her thought. It was like taking a child by the hand, and he was very fond of children.

"Are you frightened of the look of it, or of being in it, or on it?"

"The look of it, the movement and the force, and that sort of thing. Being in it is just swimming, a form of sport. I don't think about it then." She remembered the day of her arrival and how she had floated on the waves as a part of them. "Except occasionally when you seem to become part of the water, or the sky or both. I'm not explaining very well."

"I don't feel quite like that," he answered. He had not at all understood what she meant, and made no effort to do so. He wanted to tell her about himself. "I was unlucky enough to get into a current once, and be swept out to sea. They sent a boat after me when they understood what was happening."

He saw, as he expected, that her eyes had gone dark with horror at his averted fate. He laughed gently, teasing her.

"I only had to keep up till the boat arrived. A very

unheroic adventure, as I was all by myself, and only had to save my own skin. Not even a girl or an old gentleman to hold up."

"Not even a boy," Kay said, without thinking.

His eyes lost their sparkle, instantly wary; then he laughed again.

"If there had been one he would have rescued me, not the other way round. It was the last year of the war it happened."

"Where were you?"

"On holiday."

He did not say where, nor did she ask him. It was not important. She wondered why he had not said "on leave", and again which of the services he had been with during the war.

The path narrowed, so that they had to walk in single file. Roger hung back to let Kay go before him. In this order conversation was impossible, and she did not attempt it, being satisfied with the feel of the sand path under her feet, the hot smell of heather in the sun, the insistent hum of insects, and the dancing heat-blurred distance before her eyes. She had changed from her shorts into a light blue linen dress with a white collar, and white cuffs to its short sleeves. The skirt was pleated and swung as she walked. She hoped, since Roger was having such a prolonged view of her back, that the pleats were not crumpled from sitting in the hotel garden.

The path came to a fork, with one narrow and one wider arm.

"To the right," said Roger, "and we need not go in pioneering formation any more. When we reach that clump of trees, we shall be almost there."

The trees did in fact mark the edge of a road which took them in a very few minutes among the houses on the outskirts of the village.

"Down to the left now," said Roger, moving away as he spoke.

Kay followed him. She saw on a narrow board the name of the road, "Water Lane", and facing this a low square building marked Public Convenience. She looked at Roger; he was watching her, waiting for the inevitable reaction.

"Which do you think happened first?" she asked seriously, "the name or the building?"

"Oh, the name," he answered, equally gravely. "Springstead would never go in for conscious ribaldry. They probably had the village spring here in the old days. Talking of names," he added, "what is yours short for?"

"Kathleen."

"I thought it must be. How brave of you not to lie about it. So many Kathleens pretend they were christened Katherine; a much better name, of course."

"I never think of it. I hardly ever remember I wasn't christened Kay."

He nodded, pleased with her again for her lack of artifice. Added to her present gaiety and evident pleasure in his companionship, it made her both charming and attractive. The walk had brought colour to her cheeks; above her swinging blue skirt her figure pleased his eye. He led her into the cottage tea-garden with a hand on the cool slender pillar of her arm above the elbow.

Kay went forward in a dream of happiness. The years of her misery dropped from her, and with them the last shackles of her love for Dennis. She felt that deceptive sense of freedom that always comes in the moment of capture by a new love. But she was so unprepared for it, so totally surprised by her good fortune, so pathetically unable to believe that good fortune was at all likely to come her way, that the rest of the afternoon seemed to be taking place at a distance from her. She saw it from a place outside herself, while at the same time she felt she was at the centre

of it, held there by Roger's pursuing admiration, quite powerless, even had she wished, which she did not, to withdraw herself from his regard. Instead she warmed herself at the flame of his interest in her, she submitted with pleasure and thankfulness to his direction. He, for his part, watched her flowering under his hands, and his own sense of well-being expanded in time with hers.

While they drank tea and ate home-made scones and cakes, sitting in the shade of hawthorn trees where birds sang close above them or flew down to pick up crumbs, they discussed their views on music and painting and literature and the theatre and found themselves very well in agreement. There was hardly a serious or well-acted play produced in the last ten years that both had not seen and appreciated in much the same way. Kay remembered what Judy had told her.

"Why did you leave the theatre?" she said. She could not ask him if it were true that he had been ill, nor what the illness had been.

He glanced at her quickly, then turned away, giving her the profile at its noblest.

"I had a nervous breakdown," he said truthfully.

Kay experienced a little shock of alarm. A nervous breakdown was not like an attack of measles, an onslaught from outside. It was the end result of conflict within. It was a revelation of basic instability. She checked herself, remembering the war cases, where unusual strains had broken down natures quite well fitted to manage the ordinary hazards of peace-time life. Some such special strain must have been imposed on Roger; not of war, because this had happened a long time ago; but of such a kind that his artist's temperament had not been able to endure. She saw him as a young man when his mastering force, remarkable even at his present age, was in the full blaze of youth.

"People with great fires in them are dangerous to themselves," she said gently, filled with overwhelming compassion for his lost career. "They burn themselves up."

He gave her another quick look and smiled. She hoped she had not sounded patronising.

"We won't talk about me," he said. "A very dull subject. Talk about yourself."

But this she was determined not to do, and her thoughts being on the stage, she pursued them there.

"I talked to Vic Stevens on the beach this morning," she said. "Or rather, he came and talked to me—I don't know why. He seems an odd boy. He certainly can act. Did he choose that scene from Macbeth himself, or did you choose it for him?"

"You know too much," said Roger, laughing. "Yes, I chose it."

"I thought you might have. Vic didn't tell me. I just thought, after I'd heard him talk about you, and about acting, that you might have helped him to choose it. It is so absolutely right for him at the moment."

"Then he talked to you about his parents, and his worries and all that?"

"Yes." It was wonderful to be understood so fully without having to explain anything. Like having a second mind, only a fresher, masculine one, that made everything clear, and sorted out the difficulties, and turned the lights on, and brought a strange beautiful glitter to the most commonplace surface.

The stout grey-haired woman in a clean apron, who had brought their tea to them, came to clear the table.

"Let's have another pot," said Roger. He smiled at the woman, who smiled at Kay. There was an open acceptance of her happiness. Kay did not know how radiant she looked, but Roger knew, and the woman agreed with him. She

brought them a second pot of tea and a plate of small chocolate biscuits.

"They *are* kind here," said Kay, delighted.

"She likes you," said Roger, with his eyes upon her, "because you are natural and charming. That's why the boys like you, too."

Kay's head drooped: she could not look at him.

"I expect that was why young Vic wanted to talk to you."

"I don't know. He's worried about his mother. His father must be mad to have left them."

"Perhaps so." Roger spoke slowly and Kay looked up at his changed tone. "Vic may be right or he may not. He was too young when it happened to be in a position to observe anything. It is possible his father left his mother because she made things difficult for him, or even because she let him down."

"She doesn't sound that sort at all."

"A boy usually likes his mother better than his father." He spoke with some bitterness, and Kay looked at him frowning.

"Besides," he added lightly. "People get tired of one another. Love is not a very permanent condition, is it?"

She felt such strong repudiation of these words that it must have shown in her eyes. His own clouded, and he looked away from her.

Their table had been in the shade when they sat down to it, but now the sun had moved, and they were exposed to its strong rays, burning their arms, and blinding them with flashes from the knives and spoons.

"Drink up," said Roger, "before we melt, together with the chocolate biscuits."

"We had better eat them first," said Kay.

Their new discomfort made them hurry. When they had finished, Kay went into the cottage. She came out to find

that Roger had also left their table, but she could hear his voice and the answering laugh of the tea-garden's owner. She was alone among the little tables, all the other visitors had gone, and looking at her watch she discovered that the time was after six. They had been there for more than two hours.

She moved slowly along the path towards the gate of the cottage garden, stooping now and then to prop up a flower that was leaning across her way and in danger of being trodden upon. As she was bending over a long-stalked carnation she heard Roger's step on the path and straightened herself, looking back at him. He was regarding her with an amused open tenderness that made her knees weaken suddenly. They walked back down the lane and out on to the moor.

"Tell me about your writing," said Roger. "You haven't said a word about it, and it must be the most important thing you do."

"I know it should be. I want it to be. But I don't seem to be able to concentrate now. It never seems important, the way it always used to."

"Yes," he answered gravely. "It should always seem the most important thing in the world while you are doing it."

"Well, it hasn't been. Not since the end of the war."

"Why do you tire yourself out at this nursing?"

"To earn my living—to be independent of my family—really, I suppose, to live away from home."

"Is it that you can't do the actual writing, or that you don't have the ideas to write about?"

"Both—in a way. If I feel like writing I can only think of war stories and the public don't want them, I'm told. If I get an idea that is different, I don't seem able to start putting it down."

"Why don't you write a full-length novel? It would give you more time to get into, and settle down to. Short stories,

if they are going to be more than little dabs of atmosphere, or little bits of reporting, or trivial anecdotes, are very tricky to do. The best of the quite short stories are simply brilliant pieces of construction. The very best, like some of Henry James', are not so short. They are really small novels."

"I know. But I'm not a very good writer. Not even what they call competent. I just can't help writing and wanting to write. That's a most amateurish attitude, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Anyway, I am too much of a dilettante myself to condemn it. But the urge is the thing, don't you think? I'm sure you could write a novel if you tried. Why don't you start, and see what happens?"

The idea that had come into her head that morning returned to her. Perhaps it could be developed.

"I do see what you mean," she said. "I wish I could. But I don't think I should keep it up, even if I started."

"I'll keep you up to it," he said with confidence. "You see if I don't. The main thing is to get started."

She knew that she was committed to a full-length novel. Roger had made her long-cherished ambition not only possible, but certain of fulfilment. With his help, his interest—she dared not say to herself with his love, but she was quite aware that she assumed it—her novel would be written. At any rate she would be able now to give her best.

"I did think of a theme this morning," she said shyly. "I don't know if it would do."

"Tell me about it."

But she could not bring herself to go so far. It was not ready to be explained. Instead she talked about her home and her early attempts to write, and about Dennis and encouragement, and how when she was in love with Dennis she wrote better than she had ever done before.

"Or since?"

She hesitated.

"Except just after he was killed. Before I got ill I wrote a great deal and it was all successful. The magazines liked it."

"Pain stimulates creative effort," said Roger calmly. "Some people think it is a necessary condition for the artist."

"Oh, no! Happiness is better."

"But occurs so much less frequently."

Again she repudiated his cynicism, but this time with more indulgence.

"Have you known many people whose artistic output could only be kept up by pain?"

"I haven't known many creative artists."

"But of those you have known?"

"Yes. On the whole, and thinking especially of one—yes."

"Does he or she still work like that?"

"No. He committed suicide."

She stared at him, shocked into forgetting the basis of their talk. He was not looking at her; his expression was stern and infinitely sad.

"He came from one of the universities to help at the camp, a year or two before the war. He went mad; at least that was what it seemed like. No one would believe me when I told them he was going mad. Then one day he disappeared, and we all looked for him. We searched all that night and we found him in the morning. He was in a small stores hut behind my hut. He had shot himself. He must have done it when the boys were all away during the afternoon. Everyone thought he was with another group, you see, until late in the evening. Then they remembered what I had told them, and got anxious. But no one thought of his having stayed in camp. That was why we searched the moors and the shore. He must have done it when I was playing a particular Beethoven record he was very fond of. I ought to have known he would do it then, and where he would be."

She waited, but he did not say any more. She wanted very much to ask him why he should have known the suicide's intention, but she was too shy to do this, and too much startled by the tale, and by his detached manner of relating it. Instead she asked stupidly, "Did no one hear the shot?"

"It sounded like a back-fire. No one recognised it for what it was."

Again she wanted to ask him if he had not heard it himself when he was playing his Beethoven record, but she did not do so. She said, "What kind of artist was he? Did he write?"

"Yes. Rather good poems."

"What made him commit suicide?"

"They said he had been crossed in love."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you think that was an adequate reason?" He had turned his face towards her now, and spoke very earnestly.

"Or do you agree with me that he was really mad?"

"I expect he was mad," She spoke bitterly, because she remembered what he had said in the tea-garden about the transience of love, and she knew in her own heart that she was now proving him right. "Sane people get over their unhappy love affairs. It just dies."

She found that they had come back into the town, and had almost arrived at the low wall of the hotel. He was watching her attentively as she spoke. When her eyes met his he smiled.

"Oh well," he said. "I suppose we are all of us mad, more or less. Thank you for coming with me."

"Thank you for the lovely tea—and everything," said Kay, confused, and feeling she ought to have spoken first. He turned away.

"Cheeroh," he said. "I hope you weren't bored."

He was gone, leaving Kay to walk into the hotel alone.

She was disturbed by the abruptness of his leave-taking and by his last words. Had he been bored himself, to ask her that? The brightness of the afternoon was dimmed suddenly. She realised too that he had said nothing whatever about seeing her again.

CHAPTER IV

THE WEATHER HELD. Each day broke clear, with the same wind clearing away the early morning mists, and leaving the sun burning from a cloudless sky. Each morning of her shortening week Kay stood at her window to mark her good fortune and regret its swift passing.

On Wednesday she was still dazed by the splendours of her walk with Roger. She had decided already that his abrupt leave-taking confirmed their friendship. Why should he arrange another formal meeting when he now knew her well enough to ring her up at the hotel, or drop in to find her there, or seek her out on the beach or at the Howards' bungalow? That he did none of these things on Wednesday did not greatly disturb her. He was not free as she was. He had work to do. She passed the time in pleasant idleness with Judy and the children. She knew that she was going to the first of the performances that evening. The judges of the competition would be there, though the winners would not be announced until the second, final performance the next day.

At the end of the evening she had indeed seen Roger, but he was too far away for her to signal to him, and was moreover preoccupied with the elderly critic from one of the London newspapers, whom he had persuaded to act as judge. The principal of the local repertory theatre and the editor of the local newspaper made up the symposium, and Roger certainly had no time for cultivating new friendships that evening. She realised, as the performance got under way, how much work he must also have put in

during the last few days behind the scenes, helping the boys impartially to devise scenery, lighting and props, for their varied turns.

She was honest enough, however, to admit her disappointment to herself, while at the same time she granted its unreasonableness. But she managed to hide all signs of it from the Howards, and on the whole to enjoy the entertainment, which had gained in depth and fluency since her first hearing of it three days before.

But on Thursday she began to feel panic. Never had a week flown by at such a pace. She would have to report at the hospital for duty on Saturday at mid-day, and so had decided to travel back by the afternoon train on Friday. Here she was, with less than thirty-six hours to spend, with no word from Roger, no sign that he wanted to see her again, no chance even of saying good bye to him. She joined the Howards on the beach in a very despondent mood.

"Tired?" asked Judy, when Kay without speaking lay back on the sand beside her.

"No. Just wishing I didn't have to go back tomorrow."

"My dear, it can't be so soon! It doesn't seem like five minutes since last Sunday. Can't you get a full day tomorrow, and go on the night train? We can drive you over to the junction."

"Another night train for the sake of eight hours more down here? And going on duty straight after it? I don't think I could face that. But I do hate leaving."

"You certainly seem to have got quite a lot into the time."

To Kay's relief at this point Sally and Prune demanded her help in collecting seaweed from the slippery rocks exposed at low tide, and Judy did not return to the subject later. They both played with the children until Bob appeared, and then the whole party bathed, Sally and

Prune taking some elementary lessons in swimming in the largest of the rock pools.

In the afternoon the Howards' car took them all for a drive along the coast and a picnic tea on the top of the cliffs. Kay began to wake up from her dream of Roger. She had lived with his image, ruled by her idea of him, since their first meeting. This afternoon, among the dry blown grasses of the cliff top, she took back the direction of her own being, and forgot him in a spate of Service recollections. Bob and Judy were pleased with her recovered good humour, and quite ready to cap her stories with increasingly scurrilous and bawdy memories of their own. Judy was thankful that Kay seemed able to face the past now without remembering Dennis too often, or perhaps without any longer finding his memory painful.

Kay passed the afternoon in this happy natural mood until Judy quite innocently destroyed it.

"By the way," she said, as they were packing up to leave, while Sally and Prune chased their father round gorse bushes, "I saw Roger Monkhouse while I was shopping on my way to the beach this morning. He was in a tearing hurry, still very involved with the competition and trying to buy the prizes which are to be given tonight. He promised to let me know who'd won. I couldn't face sitting through the whole thing again, could you?"

Kay pulled grasses and said nothing. She would have sat through six performances to see Roger at the end of them, but not another like the right before, ignored and forgotten.

"He really does seem to have been smitten," went on Judy, so casually that Kay had time to hide her face by stooping to pick up a thermos flask. "He made a point of asking how long you were staying. When I said you were going some time tomorrow he looked quite downcast, and went off without another word."

Kay's heart beat fast. Did he want to see her again as

much as she wanted to see him? Had she disappointed him or even offended him by her bitterness over the suicide's motive? No, that could not be true. It would be transferring her own guilt felt on Dennis' account, to guilt felt on his. And that was nonsense. There was no question of deep feeling between them, only the possibility of its development. Her sane afternoon and her renewed good health told her that there had been no progress. Her common sense suggested the extreme unlikelihood of any sequel.

But as often happens when common sense puts down its large square foot, romantic imagination was bruised into rebellion. Kay chattered amusingly all the way home, helped Judy to put the children to bed, and announced her intention of settling down to write a short story after dinner at her hotel.

"Have you thought of one?" Bob asked her, smiling at her confident manner.

"Dozens."

"It really has done you good being here?"

Judy put an arm around her.

"She's a different girl, aren't you, Kay?"

"Of course it has; of course I am. You've both been more than sweet to me. I feel tons more energetic than when I came. I want to start writing something here, so that I shall go on with it after I get back."

She did not tell them it was not a short story she was about to write, but the first chapter of her full-length novel.

When she had gone the Howards looked at one another.

"Roger Monkhouse," said Judy, her eyes dancing. "Do you think . . .?"

"No," said Bob.

"Oh, but darling, he's such a charmer. And Kay does deserve to be happy. And I'm sure he likes her. You haven't got anything definite against him, have you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."

"He's magnificent at the camp."

"He's all that."

"Then why don't you think it would be a good thing?"

"I didn't say that. You asked me or implied the question, if I thought Roger would marry her."

"And you said no."

"Yes, I said no."

Judy shook her head.

"I can't see the point of this mystery. And I can't see much point in your opinion."

"Probably there isn't any."

"Oh, darling, don't be so depressing. Do you mean you think he isn't really attracted?"

Bob took his pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it. Judy knew that this signalled the end of their discussion.

On her way back to the hotel Kay knew with certainty that she would not be able to prevent herself going to the camp that evening. She expected nothing and dared not allow herself to hope, but she was in love again after a long interval of despair, and any hesitation or inclination to draw back which might have followed an advance on Roger's part, was quite reversed by his apparent lack of interest in her. She told herself how busy he must have been with his camp duties and the conduct of the competition. She was not convinced. Either she had failed to please him on closer acquaintance, or she had said something to offend him. Her thoughts went again to the suicide. Had she been flippant or lacking in attention? He had shown her how seriously the man's death had affected him. But she had not been able to feel moved or indeed much interested in the event. If only she could see him again and reverse any bad impression she might have made. She would go to the last performance of the camp theatricals, and sit where he could not fail to see her. The Howards had not spoken

to him the night before, so it was unlikely that he had noticed her presence, though he knew from Judy that she and Bob at least had seen the show. He would not suspect that she had come again for the second time, still less that she had come on his account.

Her neighbours at dinner were friendly and amusing; they invited her to play bridge with them. For a few seconds she thought of accepting. Her other project was senseless, unbecoming, thoroughly adolescent. She was ashamed of it in the company of these cheerful adults. But it ruled her, nevertheless. She excused herself with real regret, but once out of the hotel and walking towards the camp, her spirits rose in a sense of adventure.

She was given a seat at the end of a row about three-quarters of the way down the hall. As the seats were all on the same level it was difficult to see the people sitting in the rows in front. But she was able to satisfy herself that Roger was not among them.

She did not feel any particular disappointment. She had tried to do something unpractical and silly and rather fantastic and it had failed. She was accustomed to failure. She set herself to enjoy the entertainment, and very nearly succeeded in forgetting Roger and the problem of his attraction for her.

Then, quite suddenly, she saw him. He was standing against the wall below the platform on the same side of the hall as that on which she sat. He was wearing a dark green short-sleeved open-necked shirt, and he was leaning back with his hands in his pockets, his dark head resting against the wall, his face turned to the stage, where Vic Stevens as Macbeth was holding the audience enthralled.

Kay straightened herself in her chair. If when the lights went up he turned his head he could not fail to see her. She summoned her pride to stop her desire to make him turn by staring at him. She had come there, and fate had

arranged this chance. She must make no further move: she must take a gambler's view, when the margin was so small between the end or the furtherance of adventure.

Roger looked back down the hall as soon as the lights went up for the interval. He stood away from the wall directly he caught sight of Kay, and hurried down the aisle to her side. He was genuinely pleased to see her. Now that he knew the result of the competition he did not find the repeated performances very interesting. Besides, the critic, who was the only one of the judges he admired, had gone back to London, leaving the other two, the local men, to announce the prizewinners. Having spent the evening before in conversation with them, he had no wish to do so again. Instead, he had discovered an urgent need for his services back-stage, and did not emerge until the performance was under way. To find Kay there, and alone, provided him with relief for the second half of the entertainment. Besides, he found that his interest in her, which had been obscured by the arrival and presence of the critic, had now returned with greater force. She was alone, and the Howards had told him, first, that she was going with them, and later, in the town, how much they had enjoyed the show.

"So Bob and Judy haven't come again?" he asked, bending over her with a hand on the back of her chair.

"No. They saw it yesterday."

He knew that. Her evasion was very obvious. She had probably been with them the evening before, and she had come again—to see him. This confirmed his suspicion of her state of mind formed in the moment of leaving her after their walk. Well, she had come back, as they all did. It was not his fault. He had done nothing to encourage it. And she was very attractive: it seemed a pity to throw away all that solace. Besides, she had a creative mind, and here his curiosity was by no means satisfied. He was impelled once again, by that which was fundamental in him, to

disregard the scruples of convention and even the tired warnings of experience.

He did not embarrass her by asking if this were indeed her second attendance. Instead he smiled at her and said in a low voice, "I'm supposed to be back-stage, helping them with their make-up. Come along. I'm sure you will find it more amusing than in front. I only came out because Vic wanted me to criticise his gestures."

He made a comic face as he said this and Kay got up from her seat, laughing unrestrainedly.

"Then you'd better tell him what you think."

"I can't tell him much more than he knows. He ought to go to a theatre school now. Amateur clubs are a waste of time for him. He needs to get down to the real stuff."

"What about the generous, but exacting, uncle? Would he approve and lend support?"

"Almost certainly not, I should think."

He was still smiling, still speaking in the light tone in which he made conversation. Kay thought him heartless, and immediately excused his words as common sense. She followed him up a small flight of steps at the side of the platform, and they passed behind a curtain into the wings.

Here the atmosphere was all excitement and pleasure and strenuous effort. The team who were to lead off after the interval had set their stage, though it was only partially lighted. They were standing in their costumes at the centre of it. In the wings three boys, whose job was to look after the lighting and effects and curtain, leaned against wall or scenery, talking and laughing. Roger led Kay to the back of the stage. As they turned the boy at the switchboard put on all the lights. The stage itself took on the artificial brilliance of the scene arranged upon it, while the hard light, falling through a gap in the side flats, caught and modelled the khaki-clad figures of the three boys there, as if they had

been carved in wood. Kay's eyes moved to and fro, enjoying the dramatic contrast.

"It's like a Laura Knight picture," she whispered.

Roger stared at her.

"That was exactly the thought in my own mind," he said a little breathlessly. Kay did not turn to look at him; there was no need. Their thoughts moved together, and that was enough.

While one scene was being played, Roger, with Kay at his side, helped the next set of actors with finishing touches to their make-up and costumes. Here Kay was able to help, particularly with the adventitious figures of those taking women's parts. The boys were inclined to wear these aids too high and unevenly placed. There was a good deal of giggling as she altered shoulderstraps and strings to produce a more natural appearance. Roger watched the proceedings with amusement: he was pleased to find Kay neither prudish nor immodest.

As for her, the evening came to an end all too soon. She stood with Roger in the wings while the remaining two judges gave away the prizes, the first to Macbeth, the second to a scene from the Rivals, and a consolation prize to an ambitious original one-act thriller.

"That's that for another month," said Roger, when it was all over and the hall was emptying.

"That's that for good," said Kay in a low voice.

He did not answer her, but followed her down the steps into the hall. The audience had left and the lights were being put out. Kay reached the door before she remembered her coat.

"I left it on my chair," she said quickly, running back up the side of the hall for it. It took her a few minutes to find it in the darkness, and seeing Roger still waiting for her near the open door, lit by one lamp that hung above it on the outside, she ran back. As she neared him he stretched

both arms wide, so that if she continued she must run into them. Instinctively she checked herself, wheeled about with her back to him, and began to put on her coat. Her heart was pounding, she wondered if her knees would carry her. When she turned again he was watching her quietly, with his arms dropped to his sides.

He walked with her to the edge of the camp.

"Don't bother to come any further," Kay said. "It's rather late, and I expect you have things to do here."

"We have a sort of celebration supper," he answered. "So I won't come any further if you don't mind."

"Of course not." She found it difficult to find breath to speak. "I must say goodbye now, and of course, thank you."

"Are you going away so soon?"

"Tomorrow at lunch time. I have to be on duty on Saturday afternoon."

"But the night train would deliver you in time for that."

"Oh yes, easily. But rather tiring."

"I seem to remember . . ."

They both laughed.

"That was different. It was the start of a holiday. This will be the start of a year's work."

"How formidable you make it sound." He turned away from her. "Couldn't you go by the night train, and we might have a walk somewhere after tea? I shall be tied to the camp till five, but we could find some tea in the town then."

She summoned her voice with a great effort.

"Yes, I could do that."

He smiled at her very affectionately.

"You are wonderfully agreeable. You make less fuss over plans than any woman I know."

"Thank you kindly. Where do I meet you at five?"

"I'll pick you up at your pub."

"I won't be there. I have to leave it by twelve in the

morning. I'm taking my things over to the Howards: they were giving me an early lunch and running me to the junction to catch the fast train."

"I see. In that case it had better be at the Bun Shop. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. The Bun Shop at five."

"Right."

They turned away from one another. Kay's mind was filled with the light and colour and sound of her happy evening. Her hopes had been so far exceeded that she had already outstripped their original meagre form. She had gone to the camp to wish goodbye to a small still-born friendship. She found herself clasping a healthy infant, passionately dedicating her heart and soul to its prosperity. So far from saying goodbye, they had not even said good-night. This time she felt sure their intimacy was established. She saw no reason at all to doubt that Roger's wishes matched her own.

CHAPTER V

JUDY HOWARD was enthusiastic, Bob again silent, over the postponing of Kay's departure, and the probable cause of this.

"She says Roger wants to discuss her writing with her, and she thinks his opinion will be very valuable. He isn't free till five, so he can't see her till then. She didn't say when she met him to make these arrangements. I think it's pretty obvious she must have gone to the second performance at the camp and talked to him afterwards."

"You women!" said Bob in a voice of placid disgust.

"I don't care," answered his wife, ruffling his hair with spirit. "I'm fond of Kay and thankful to see her taking an interest in someone at last."

"How do you know she hasn't got a boy friend in London? You haven't seen her for years, and she hardly ever writes either."

"I should have heard by now if she had. I think Roger would suit her perfectly. He's the quiet type with a will of iron. I've seen it in operation on the boys once or twice. It was quite impressive."

"Why do you think Kay needs to be ruled with a rod of iron? I always thought she was on the timid side myself, needing encouragement more than anything else."

"That's what I mean. Roger can use his will power to bring her out. He seems to have begun. All this about her writing . . ."

"She probably just gave that out as a good reason for going by the night train."

"Don't debunk the poor kid. And anyway it shows Roger does take a definite interest in her. At his age it is likely to be serious. I mean he is getting on, isn't he? Men of forty don't play about just for the fun of it unless they are confirmed rakes, do they?"

"I don't think Roger would."

"You are depressingly unconstructive."

Bob threw back his head and laughed.

"You mean I won't join you in your romantic speculations? No. I won't. Frankly I think you're laying hopes where they aren't likely to come to anything. My impression of Monkhouse is that personal relationships don't mean all that to him, either with men or women, but particularly women."

"Did he tell you so?"

"No."

Bob's face adopted the defensive look of most men when they are invited by one of the opposite sex to discuss a member of their own. Judy knew that she would get nothing more out of him. So she went into the garden to see why the children were being unnaturally quiet at their play.

Kay brought her luggage to the bungalow early, and was persuaded by the Howards to go with them to the beach for a last bathe.

"We can rinse your things in tap water when we get back," Judy explained. "Then they will dry properly in the sun this afternoon, and you can pack them in your bag afterwards. What time are you meeting Roger?"

"Five, at the Bun Shop."

"We ought to leave here at seven to catch your train at the junction. Don't be late, will you?"

"No, I won't be late."

She was so self-possessed that Judy began to doubt the validity of her romantic hopes. But she clung to them,

nevertheless. With the limited horizon of the happily married, she saw no proper future for her friend outside it.

So the morning passed cheerfully in the usual beach routine of sunbathing, swimming, and playing with Sally and Prune. After lunch, when the table was cleared and the children had been put down to rest, Kay looked about for her bag.

"A bit early to start, isn't it?" said Judy, smiling at her friend.

Kay flushed.

"I wanted to see if I've got a pencil in my bag. I lent one to Prune on the beach the other day and it disappeared in the sand. I used to have two. Yes, it's all right, the other one is here."

"What made you think of pencils?"

"I want to make a few notes—for something I'm going to write when I get back. Actually, I think I will go out and find a spot on the cliffs. Looking at the sea has a good effect on me. And I'm sure you want to play tennis, or Bob does, anyway. You won't think me very churlish if I go off on my own, will you? This idea of mine has started to nag, the way they always do."

She laughed apologetically, and Bob nodded.

"Of course we don't mind. You go and let the old subconscious fizz. I'm sure it'll turn you out a first-rate short story."

She did not explain that the notes would be for her novel. She was still too uncertain of her purpose to speak of it to anyone but Roger.

The lower slopes of the cliff path were crowded with people, mostly sitting or lying in pairs in the shade of the gorse bushes which grew there profusely. As she climbed higher Kay found herself among the walkers and strollers. The former passed her, swinging purposefully into the distance; the latter she left behind. But the solitude she looked for

was not to be found on this busy thoroughfare. She decided to leave it, and daring to explore the cliff edge, found it much less formidable than she had imagined when she was walking at some distance from it, seeing only an edge and the sea far beyond and far below. For the rocky precipices falling to the beach did not run up to the summit of the cliffs except at the headland. Nearer to the town they petered out in steep slopes covered with heather and grass and bramble, dipping here and there to gullies where narrow streams ran out from among stones, and delicate ferns leaned over small cliff pools. In one such gully, approached through a thicket of gorse bushes, Kay found herself a secure retreat. She sat down in the shade of a rock, took off her sandals, found pencil and writing block, and leaned back, gazing out to sea.

Very slowly the distracting influence of her surroundings faded and the plot of her novel grew distinct in its main outline. She wrote a brief summary of her story, pondered for a long time on the balanced position of its climax, tried to consider the various problems of tension and sequence, and gave up the task. It was no use. A short story was about her mark; the swift brief embodiment of an idea with a dramatic twist to round it off. The old-fashioned straightforward objective tale. She had not the style nor the poetry for newer methods. She was not capable of sustaining the intricacies of a long development. Her characters had always been her weak point. They had to be ready-made and static. She did not know how to let them grow and develop out of the circumstances she packed round them. But in spite of her misgivings and the very meagre results of her pondering, she kept it up until the sun came round the edge of her rock to dazzle her with the glare from the white paper on her lap. She found then that her feet and hands were cold, and stretching herself sideways in the new warmth, looked from under lazy eye-

lids at the enhanced blue and green and purple of the sea below her. The novel was forgotten, and her effort to see it, however imperfectly, as a logical whole. Instead she gave herself up to purely sensuous enjoyment, of the kind she had found swimming in the sea on the day of her arrival. It was much more rewarding, and she was leaving so soon. A year of work, mostly uncongenial, stood between her and the renewal of this moment.

But she was not too bemused by her indulgence to forget the time of day. Rather she allowed herself to believe that this refreshment of her spirit through bodily well-being was a fit preparation for her last contact with Roger. She was going to add his memory to this satisfaction, and hoped thereby to enshrine it fittingly. She had persuaded herself through a night of wakefulness with its inevitable ensuing doubt that his interest in her was trivial, and that their undeveloped friendship was not likely to survive separation. And so she was entitled to use it as she wished, as one would use a letter from a friend; to throw it away, to keep it lying on a desk for a while before destroying it, or to put it at once in the private drawer reserved for important relics. Roger, she felt, would be a most important relic, an inspiration and a blessing, with little regret and no disillusionment. She was in a very exalted mood.

He was at the Bun Shop before she reached it. She saw his head above the net curtains at the shop window, and when she went in he was facing the door, watching for her, but keeping a genial eye on the antics of the other people in the shop.

He got up as she entered, moving round the table so that she in her turn could watch the world, while he, with his back to it, watched her. They talked very little and ate little, both aware of the limited time before them, and wishing to spend as much of it as possible out of doors.

"Up or down?" asked Roger, as they left the shop.

"I've been both today," answered Kay laughing. "I was on the beach this morning, and up on the cliff, or halfway up it, this afternoon."

He made her explain where she had found her solitude.

"You are cleverer than I am and much braver," he said when she had finished. "I've never tried to see what went on over the edge of the cliff. I imagined a steep drop and I am not at all fond of heights."

"I had—the friend I told you about—Dennis—" Kay answered. "He took me to Wales once when we were both on leave—in the war. We did some climbs—really only walks—but I found I didn't mind steep places at all. I've never been again, because he was killed soon after that."

"Was he a friend of Bob Howard's?"

"Yes."

"Then that was the one you were engaged to?"

"Oh, yes. Everybody got engaged to their boy-friends. They often broke it off, but a lot got married too."

They had climbed to the main coast road and now turned away from it towards the headland that lay on the opposite side of the bay from the place where Kay had spent the afternoon. There were fewer gorse bushes and brambles here, and the grass was longer, brushed flat by the prevailing wind into treacherous slippery swathes lying towards the cliff edge. Though they had not spoken for some minutes since Kay made her confidence, their next remarks implied no break in the continuity and closeness of their thought.

"You don't really think that your experience was a dull commonplace, do you?"

Her reply was spoken very low, but he seemed to have no difficulty in hearing it.

"Of course I don't. But it would be equally silly to think it was unique."

"Nothing ever seems unique after it has happened."

“And everything does while it is happening.”

They had walked straight forward and were now very near the edge of the grass-covered slope.

“We shall certainly have a unique experience soon if you insist upon our walking straight off the cliff,” said Roger, putting out a hand to check her. “And one, as I have just told you, I should particularly dislike.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad together,” said Kay, not thinking at all what she was saying. Roger sighed audibly. He knew that the fault for the unfortunate turn in the conversation was his, but that did not make it any the less tiresome.

“I see no point in walking any further, do you?” he asked cheerfully, looking about for a place to sit down upon. “We have an excellent view of the western sea and if we wait long enough we can watch the sun turn green as it sets.”

“Oh, have you ever?” asked Kay, who had heard of this. “I never believed it until a scientist explained it to me. I had to believe him because he was a boffin we had attached to our station, but I didn’t see why it should happen then and not at any other time. Do you know how it is supposed to work?”

“No. I don’t even know a boffin.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Never. But I often try hopefully. As a rule a bank of cloud gets up just as the sun is nearing the horizon and it simply dives into that, as orange or red as ever.”

Kay laughed.

“It looks clear enough today, doesn’t it? But I shan’t be able to stay till sundown. Bob and Judy are taking me to the junction. I have to get back to the bungalow by seven.”

They looked at their watches. Time pressed heavily upon them both: upon Kay, because the last minutes were so precious to her that they paralysed her with their importance; upon Roger, because her preoccupation with

her love took her away from him and he felt bored. He would not have minded starting the homeward walk at once, but he did not want to wound her. He realised that if he found this meeting dull it was his own fault for trying to recapture moments that can never be fixed. Their walk to Springstead had possessed a lyrical quality that had refreshed him altogether unexpectedly. But nothing, he knew from long experience, was so transient as such moments: he deplored in himself the childish wish to have them repeated.

"I shall miss the colours most," said Kay wistfully. "London can be lovely sometimes, at dusk and on cloudy spring days, but I like good rich colour and plenty of it."

"I have never noticed anything particularly beautiful about this place," said Roger from the depths of his melancholy.

She stared at him with puzzled eyebrows. He could not be sincere, because his appreciation of beauty was keener than most men's. But if it was not a fault of observation, it could only be that he lied. And to lie in such a trivial manner was a kind of showing-off. She was reminded of Sally's tirade against the sun, and was a little shocked at her associative memory.

"You can't really mean that," she said earnestly. "Look at the sea down there and this grass and the sand in the bay. They are wonderful."

"But rather obvious."

She would not be abashed by sophistication.

"They are lovely deep satisfying colours. They go on and on in your mind as you look at them. They turn into all sorts of things—"

"Now you will begin to quote Shelley to me," he said, mocking her gently. "Glorious technicolour, I call it."

"Oh, it isn't! You know it isn't. You're just being obstinate."

It was more than obstinacy, she knew. Her knowledge of the infinite pride lying behind his resistance frightened her and made her ashamed of her criticism, though she believed it just. In the next moment he disarmed her with a smile of the greatest possible sweetness. She hastened to explain her partisanship.

"You see I spent most of this afternoon soaking it into me up on the cliff on the other side of the bay. I went up there to start my novel," she added shyly.

He was interested at once.

"How did it get on?"

"It didn't. I wrote down a very vague outline of the story and tried to think about getting it into shape, and I couldn't concentrate so I just looked at the sea and the sky and enjoyed myself. Up there above the bay it was like floating in the air. There was a seagull that kept hovering a few feet out from the cliff. It was hoping I had some food for it. Flying looked so easy. I felt almost that I *was* flying, turning into part of the air, being held up by it and merging into it. Dennis used to talk a lot about flying: not just flying aeroplanes, but being in the air. I never understood what he meant then, but I think I do now."

"You said something like this before, about the sea," Roger said thoughtfully. "I don't think I really understand what you mean."

"I say it very badly," she apologised.

"Are you sure you mean something in your own experience, and not simply a vague metaphysical wish-fulfilment?"

She considered this, frowning.

"No. It is real. It only happens occasionally, but it is real when it happens. Perhaps you don't have it the same way."

"I don't have it at all," said Roger firmly. "I'm much too sceptical of my surroundings. You mustn't start

floating about in mid-air, you know. You must settle down to earth, preferably at a table, and start writing your book."

She smiled at him.

"I know." She was beginning to feel again the warmth of his encouragement, the luxury of obeying his power over her mind. "I promise I will; perhaps on Sunday. There won't be much doing in the wards, apart from the visitors."

"I wish you didn't have all this accursed drudgery."

"And you a social worker! I'm one of the nation's most valued and scarce types. Without me wards would close and—"

"People would have to look after their sick relations themselves, instead of trying to get other people to do it for them."

"They can't all be nursed at home. They have to have investigations—tests and X-rays and all that sort of thing."

"To tell them more accurately the approximate date of their death? Does that do them any good?"

"There are a lot of things you can't treat until you know exactly what is wrong?"

"Can you then?"

"Not always. But you have to do the investigations. It's the modern scientific way: the doctors are interested, and the patients expect it."

"The patients expect miracles. And the relations want to evade responsibility."

"No, not always. They want to get the best for the patients."

She protested against his poor view of human motives, and he gave way this time, laughing at her vehemence.

"All the same I resent the claims of all these people on your time. It should be devoted to your art."

"I don't think my art is big enough or ever will be big enough to claim so much."

She spoke with the dignity of conviction, and it silenced him. He looked at his watch again.

"I don't want to rush you, but if you are to be back at the Howards by seven, I think—"

She scrambled up at once, slipping a little on the springy grass. He caught at her hand.

"Brace 'em up," he said. "I can't have you plunging into the bay."

They both slipped once or twice as they climbed to level ground. He kept a firm grip of her hand all the time.

"If I slip now, I might pull you down too," said Kay, after one particularly false step.

"Then we will plunge together or not at all," he answered gallantly. She was not unaware that his response was mechanical. As soon as they reached the cliff path he dropped her hand and moved forward at a brisk pace.

They spoke little on the way back to the bungalow. Once more Kay doubted. She was sure that she had in some way disappointed him, and she was depressed by the way the conversation had all turned upon herself. It was her own fault that the writing had not been properly discussed. But beyond that, there had been nothing notable; he had not told her any more of the things she wanted to know about him; he had not been in a confiding mood. She remembered the walk to Springstead with another pang of regret, blaming herself for the halting progress of their friendship. Then, thinking how short a time was left before she would be facing him for the last time, she steeled herself to accept another blow from fate and at least to show indifference to what could only be a minor hurt.

"I won't come in," Roger said, stopping outside the gate of the Howards' bungalow. "I am playing bridge up here tomorrow evening, so I shall see Bob and Judy then. I won't get in your way now."

She held out her hand mechanically, and he took it so lightly and withdrew his own so quickly that she scarcely felt the contact. He turned his face away from her.

"You won't fade out of the picture, will you?" he said in a deliberate, slightly self-conscious voice.

A great wave of joy swept through Kay's heart, its unexpectedness leaving her trembling. In an instant all her doubts were resolved. From this moment, she felt she had nothing more to fear, because her faith had been restored to her. She answered in a tone so low that he had difficulty in hearing her, "No, I won't fade out of the picture."

He turned then, his eyes lit by such a blaze of triumph and pleasure and, as she thought, desire, that her own eyes could not meet them. She bent her head, standing before him in an attitude of submission.

"I shall be in London again at the beginning of September," he said. "I'll ring you up. But write to me before that, won't you?"

"Yes, I will."

"Well—cheeroh!"

"Cheeroh."

He did not touch her and she did not move. In fact she stayed there at the gate, incapable of movement, but alive in every part of her body, watching him walk steadily down the road away from her. Judy, who had watched the final parting from the door of the bungalow, had to take Kay's arm to recall her to her surroundings.

"Wake up, my dear," she said laughing. "And cheer up. I bet you haven't seen the last of him."

"Oh no, I know I haven't." Kay was blushing and smiling. "He wants me to meet him in town."

"What did I tell you?" Judy was delighted, but practical. "Tell me all about it in the car. We ought to get cracking. Bob! Kay's back!"

In the car, however, Kay managed to keep Bob in the conversation and to turn it away from Roger. Not until she was curled into the corner of the train carriage did she unloose her thoughts again and fill her silent night with extravagant songs of thanksgiving and praise.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOSPITAL where Kay Lawson was a probationer served a mixed south-London district, chiefly of working-class homes and new council estates, but including as well some suburban middle-class avenues and crescents and roads, whose inhabitants, when their illness was trivial, clung to gentility as the private patients of their doctors, but when operations threatened chose to consult their specialists in the out-patient department. It was a hospital of two hundred and fifty beds, supported by voluntary contributions and for ever in debt. The staff was composed of rising young consultants who for one reason or another had not secured posts at their teaching hospitals, and a few elderly local men who had won distinction through years of experience. The atmosphere of the hospital was friendly and intimate, almost provincial. The small nursing school was grossly below strength, and there was grave doubt if it would be licensed under the coming National Health scheme.

Cecilia Ward, where Kay Lawson worked, included a long sunlit room housing eighteen beds, and two small private rooms, set with the service rooms, ward laboratory, bathroom, and Sister's room, along a passage leading in from the main second-floor corridor. In the public part of the ward there were six beds on each side, and two at either end. Radiators stood under the windows and two long tables in the centre of the gangway between the beds carried various kinds of apparatus, and a few bowls of flowers. Trolleys on wheels, bearing more apparatus

shrouded in white cloths, suggested that the collection on the table was a museum display not meant for use. This was not so, for they had been brought out merely for routine inspection by the visiting physician in a time-honoured annual review. They would soon be put back in their places in the cupboards and used on appropriate occasions. But they gave the former impression to the patients who lay and wondered about them. Apart from the tables and trolleys, the screens, a locker and chair beside each bed, and Sister's desk with its rack of forms and writing paper, there was no furniture in the ward. All was severe, polished, and functional. The laboratory atmosphere prevailed.

On the Monday morning following her return to work, Kay Lawson hurried about the ward upon her various errands. She had slept away the effects of her second night journey, and was filled with the energy so easily released from a confident contented spirit. If she had been at home she would have been singing, in her breathy untrained voice with its surprisingly sweet top notes, one of the many old ballads she had learned from Dennis. But she could not sing in the ward, so she smiled at the patients instead, and cracked jokes with those who were approaching convalescence.

Sister Blakeley followed her movements with surprise and pleasure. She had never taken very much to Nurse Lawson, finding her evasive and inexact in her answers to questions, and inclined to take an emotional, sometimes almost hysterical, attitude to patients who were seriously ill. Human feeling was right, Sister would agree, but if carried to extremes it could do no good to anyone, least of all to the sufferer. And it made the relatives very difficult to handle. If they were allowed into the ward at all hours it played havoc with discipline. Sister preferred the next of kin to take reports from her and not to monopolise the bedside of the dying. After all, it was only for their own

satisfaction they wanted to be there: in most cases, that is to say. Where a patient would benefit from the sight of a loved one, she would be the last to forbid it. But such a thing was comparatively rare: usually it was the other way round. The relation did more harm than good, and Nurse Lawson had all too often connived at it.

But this morning Sister Blakeley, writing up reports and sorting papers at her desk, was agreeably surprised. Both her probationers were looking sunny, brightening up the patients and one another and even Staff nurse, whose grim efficient square face relaxed a little when they spoke to her. All this was gain. In a women's ward, such as hers, where the emotional tension was always high, and there was at the moment an unusual number of serious cases behind screens, Sister was glad of the marked improvement in her staff. In the old days one pro's temperament would not have touched the even surface of the ward's efficiency. But now with so small a staff and her own advancing years, the balance was precarious, and she knew it.

There was a flurry outside the doors of the public ward; a ward maid poked her head inside and withdrew it, the doors moved again as if to admit a party, then swung to and continued to clap themselves gently to a standstill.

Sister frowned. She wanted to finish her reports before Dr. Mathers, the visiting physician, appeared, but this commotion might well mean his arrival. If so, he had decided to see the two private patients first, and it would be a sheer waste of her time to go out to him. Both cases were well on the way to recovery, and off her hands as far as serious nursing was concerned. Her presence at their bedside was unnecessary. On the other hand Dr. Mathers was a taciturn man with a liking for etiquette. She looked about her, catching Kay's eye as she moved from one bed to the next.

"Nurse Lawson," she said briskly, "just go out and see

if that is Dr. Mathers. If it is, come back and tell me. He will be stuck with the private beds for ages. If it isn't, see who was making all that fuss in the passage and stop them doing it again."

"Yes, Sister."

Kay hurried out. The ward maid, who had tried to signal to Sister and failed, was sulking in the ward kitchen, having washed her hands of the whole affair. She did not answer when Kay spoke to her, so the latter moved on to the first private ward, only to be thrown back by Dr. Mather's rapid emergence from it, followed by his houseman, Derek Crawford.

"I'll tell Sister," said Kay breathlessly, recovering herself.

"No need, I'm going into the ward myself."

Dr. Mathers swept past her, flinging open the ward door, which his houseman caught with some dexterity and closed without a sound. Kay slipped in at the last moment as he did so, giggling over Sister's miscalculation and present discomfiture. Crawford grinned in sympathy. He had never taken much notice of the nurses in Cecilia before this morning, finding he needed all his wits when there to deal with Sister Blakeley. But he could not help acknowledging Kay's good spirits and fresh colour and shining eyes. His own affairs were at a low ebb just then; the girl who had seemed like a dream come true five months before had developed into the worst kind of headache. She had, to his great relief, just taken herself out of his life, but the vacuum, though pleasant in its way, was unfilled. Kay's bright face sent a little wave of fresh interest through him.

Sister Blakeley left her desk with fury in her heart. Nurse Lawson had failed her, Dr. Mathers was an unpredictable madman, Mr. Crawford a silly conceited young puppy. Her wrath was so apparent in the fixed politeness of her face and the rigid set of her cap-strings, that even Dr. Mathers saw there was need to propitiate her. On the

way into the ward he had said of the private patients to his houseman, "Get those two old bitches on to their legs again. I'm sick of their endless complaints and self-importance." But to Sister he enquired mildly, "When do you think we could let Mrs. Donaldson go home? And Miss O'Connor too, for that matter? I've done all I can for both of them."

She answered grimly, "The sooner the better, sir, as far as I am concerned," and they both laughed, sharing a common burden. Sister was not deceived, but she admired Dr. Mathers' astuteness as much as she respected his skill, even if he did behave like a tornado.

By the end of the ward round everyone was restored to Sister's favour, even Kay, for her skilful handling of a faulty connection in the lighting of the X-ray viewing box.

"How did you manage that?" Crawford murmured to her while Mathers pushed a second film under the clips that held it against the lighted ground-glass of the box. He stood back to study it.

"It had a loose connection."

"Don't I know it! But I couldn't shift the screw. I fiddled with it for hours yesterday but I couldn't move it with any of the weapons Sister gave me."

"I know. I couldn't either. So I cut the wire above the connection and got another from Jerome Ward. They had a spare."

"Good for you. But I wouldn't tell that to Sister if I were you. She has a permanent feud with Jerome. She wouldn't like to feel under an obligation to them."

"I wouldn't be so dumb."

Dr. Mathers, turning to point out some feature of the X-ray plate to his junior, brought the whispered conversation to an end. Kay expected an instant reprimand from Sister, but nothing happened. She decided that the world had indeed become a better place since her holiday.

In the lift on the way down to the main hall of the hospital Dr. Mathers himself remarked upon the improvement in Kay's appearance.

"Is that nurse in Cecilia a friend of yours?"

"Which one, sir?"

"Don't tell me they are all friends of yours, Crawford."

His houseman was properly confused, as he meant him to be.

"No, sir. None of them are, actually. But do you mean Lawson—Kay Lawson?"

"Is that her name? Intelligent girl. She fixed that viewing box better than anyone has for the last month. Women have no natural mechanical sense, of course. You might have done it yourself."

"I did try, sir."

"Now don't tell me little Lawson managed where you failed. She's been away, hasn't she?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Done her a power of good. I hope my holiday does as much for me. You know, Crawford, these nurses lead a very unhealthy life. Run off their feet, associated with men in their work and segregated almost like nuns in their private life. No wonder so many of them give it up for one reason or another. That girl Lawson, for instance. I've watched her off and on for the last year. Keeps turning up in my wards. Got an interesting face; intelligent. But she's an unstable type. She'll never make a ward sister. She ought to marry; someone to look after her and give her a bit of ballast."

"I see what you mean, sir."

Young bastard, thought Dr. Mathers. Throwing his youth and his arrogant indifference in my teeth. Serve him right to go through the mill that girl's been through. Dr. Mathers had taken the trouble to acquaint himself with Kay's history when she had been accepted as a student

nurse, and as he had a phenomenal memory for any detail that interested him, he had not forgotten it. A commonplace story enough for these days, but no less important for all that. Nursing was a responsible business: the standards must not be lowered too far in spite of the shortage. He was glad the little Lawson had come back from her holiday looking so wonderfully improved.

Derek Crawford went to Cecilia Ward again towards the end of the morning. There were one or two instructions from Dr. Mathers he wanted to pass on to Sister. There were one or two patients who might have been upset or confused by Dr. Mathers' vigorous pronouncements upon them and their diseases. Besides these duties he acknowledged a definite wish to run across Nurse Lawson again. Much of his resistance to Dr. Mathers' praise of her had arisen from his own essential agreement with it, added to a perverse dislike of sharing any personal views with his chief.

As he might have known if he had stopped to think about it, the ward dinner was in full progress. Sister stood at the open, self-propelled, self-heating containers, fishing up spoonfuls of cottage pie and greens, while Staff nurse stood beside her pouring gravy from a large white jug over each completed helping. Kay Lawson and her fellow probationer hurried to and fro distributing the homely meal to those who were permitted or able to face it. Clearly this was not a propitious moment. Crawford hesitated just inside the door of the ward, unwilling to retire, but uncertain how to achieve any of the things he had meant to do. Presently Sister, seeing him from the corner of her eye as she glanced about the ward to mark her own progress with the serving, solved his problem for him. She had work for him to do that would be good for him. Handing the ritual spoon to Staff nurse, she swept towards the door.

"I'm glad you have come back, Mr. Crawford. Betty

Tilling is going down very fast. Dr. Mathers wouldn't speak to her aunt about her. He saw the parents yesterday, if you remember. But it's her aunt who has practically brought her up. Both the parents work in their shop, and the aunt runs the house. You've met her."

"I remember."

Crawford looked very miserable. Sister, though she liked the housemen to have some feeling left in the midst of all their excess of science, provided it did not impair their judgment, was inclined to be impatient with him. She wanted to get back to her dinners.

"Try to make her see that Dr. Mathers has done everything humanly possible. You'll find her with Betty. She says she won't leave her now till the end."

Crawford walked down the ward to one of the screened beds, and passing behind the insubstantial green barrier, moved into the world of the dying. A silent figure seated at the bedside turned her head without getting up.

Crawford did his work clumsily, but he was honest, and his distress brought him to the aunt's level in such a way as to give her comfort.

"I know you've all done your best, doctor," she said with an uncomplaining acceptance of defeat. "I just wanted to ask Dr. Mathers what was the cause of it all. Because in a manner of speaking, sir, she has been my child all along, and I wouldn't like to feel it was any neglect on my part—"

"No, of course it wasn't."

He spoke with conviction and with the irritation of the scientist for this universal search for a scapegoat. Why couldn't people see that mostly it was just chance? Well, in cases like this one, anyway. Where the home conditions were good. This girl's unusual form of kidney disease was nobody's fault; she simply lacked the ability to cope with her physical environment. It was sheer bad luck. There was as little purpose in her death as there had been in her birth.

Perhaps at bottom that had something to do with it. The unwanted only child of two people whose sole concern and interest in life was their business. Something in that situation, perhaps, had provided the weakness. He dismissed these speculations as fanciful. And to fortify his faith in the facts as he had been taught them, he explained the illness patiently and fully to the dying girl's aunt. She accepted it as she accepted the death, with dignity but without any sort of understanding.

"What must be, must be," she said at last, careful to preserve her grief until she was alone.

Crawford emerged from the screens to meet Kay Lawson waiting to go in.

"Rotten case, that," he muttered, still affected by the contact.

"I know."

She looked at him and smiled. There was about her no sign of levity, nor any indifference to the fearful solemnity of death, but her face did not lose its brightness. It was as if her inner self, bearing its secret happiness like a torch, lighted her compassion, making it glow with a sustaining strength. He wondered again at the change in her.

"I've been talking to the girl's aunt," he said, closing the screens behind him and speaking very low. "She has an idea she didn't do enough for the poor kid. All rot, of course."

"Of course."

"Do your best to persuade her she has been magnificent."

"I'll try."

He moved out of her way and she slipped quietly from his sight between the screens. It had come into his mind as he stood appealing for her help, that she would be a nice sort of girl to take to the cinema sometime; one day that week, perhaps. But the moment had not been suitable for invitations. And any day would do. The poor child behind

the screens would be dead by tomorrow. And old Mrs. Dobson too, with any luck. She had outlived her own and everyone else's patience. Then the ward would be easier, more normal, and he would get Kay—odd name that—to go out with him, if their off-days fitted in.

"I've spoken to Miss Tilling," he said to Sister, not stopping as he passed her on his way out of the ward.

"Thank you, Mr. Crawford."

Sister, watching his retreating back, wondered what he had really come for this second time, because it seemed to her that he had completely forgotten to carry it out. Naturally she did not link him in her mind with Kay.

But Derek had the healthy tenacity of youth, and persevered with his new plan. Kay was quite willing to please and to be entertained in the spirit of casual friendliness she had learned before she met Dennis. It was pleasant to go about with a man occasionally, and Derek seemed to find it pleasant to take her with him, though he must have known she was several years older than himself. They made no demands on one another and confided no secrets. Kay wondered sometimes why they did not tire of one another's company, but her inner happiness was such that it banished all uneasy thoughts and feelings.

For her profound exaltation remained with her. It was of a nature, founded on a complete unquestioning faith in Roger's love and the promise of its early fulfilment, to sustain and feed itself. It lifted her to heights she had never known, even with Dennis. From their eminence she regarded the world about her tolerantly and with more kindness than she was usually able to discover. And her work at the hospital continued to improve. Sister Blakeley, who had up to this time been inclined to give responsible jobs to Gwen Oldham, the other pro, reserving routine matters for Kay, now began to reverse their rôles, so that Kay sometimes had to make decisions herself, and making

them rightly, gained in confidence and self-reliance. The time came to clear the centre tables: Kay was allotted the task and disposed of the encumbering apparatus so economically that Sister had room in her cupboards for a whole shelf of oddments she had despaired of housing out of sight. And Kay's arrangements of the ward flowers met with universal praise.

All this was good, but in her creative life her happiness did not bear the fruits she had expected of it. She found that the writing of her novel, on which her reputation in her own mind had come now to depend, was held up by day-dreams. Every time she tried to settle down with her notes, to drive her characters into action, even to see them in the circumstances she had devised for them, Roger's face and voice and gestures flooded her mind. She invented a thousand charming scenes in which she played herself, by witty, or poignant, or merely sentimental stages, into his arms, and by progressive steps from there into matrimony. Meanwhile her novel stagnated, or got the kind of half-hearted consideration most calculated to destroy its freshness.

This was not to say that the artist was entirely silent. One July evening when rain prevented her going out as she had planned, a short story grew out of the shining, fountain-spattered pavements below her window. She finished it in three hours, tidied it up the next evening, and was gratified by its early acceptance for one of the magazines to which she had contributed before the war. The editor wrote her a personal letter saying how pleased he was that she had recovered her old form and that he hoped now to have regular copy from her. She passed the letter on to Roger with three exclamation marks of her own added to its closing words.

For her pen was far from idle, though her creative impulse was so choked by her new-found love. Her letters

to Roger obsessed her as her novel should have done. She found herself inventing phrases for them as she went about the ward, altering, polishing, adding an amusing twist, pinning on an interesting distortion. She worked at these letters as she had never worked at her short stories, and it was all done in her mind before she wrote them down. She would have been shocked and ashamed to correct their scripts after they were written. Except for the alteration of a word here and there, the addition of punctuation where her rapid flight over the paper had left it out, her letters went to the post as they came from her pen. They were extravagant in part, and occasionally mawkish in tone. They assumed the mutual love that in fact did not exist, but they never referred to it openly. Kay looked forward to the time when Roger would declare himself, but she was careful not to anticipate it by any careless or indiscreet reference of her own.

For his part Roger wrote to her twice during the whole of this time. The first letter was a short one in July, to thank her for hers, and to ask her to write another when she had the time. The second, a longer one, written at the end of August, held a full and admirable criticism of her successful short story, a copy of which she had sent to him; at the end he added a very brief reference to the camp and its affairs. He did not give the date of its closing, and Kay realised on reading it that she had no idea of his London address. But such unimportant omissions on his part in no way disturbed her.

CHAPTER VII

IN POINT OF FACT Roger's second letter to Kay was written the day before the camp broke up for the season.

He was neither a good, nor a regular, letter writer. So he was inclined to congratulate himself upon the impulse that had led him to sort the papers in his despatch box, tearing up some and replacing others, making a pile of camp business, and a scarcely smaller pile of neglected personal matters; to dispose of the former to the acting camp secretary, and to settle down with the latter at the door of his hut, a writing pad on his knee and a packet of envelopes at his side. With that really remarkable concentration of nervous energy he was able, at times, to release in the service of some particular piece of work, he soon had all his letters answered, all his affairs in order. He then sat back, dismissing the whole task from his mind. He gave himself to serious thought.

All round him boys were dragging heavy bundles to the doors of huts, whence a lorry would presently take them away. The boys themselves were to travel in specially chartered motor coaches, leaving the camp at early dawn the next day. With their personal luggage gone in advance they had only themselves to look after until they reached the central London club building in the evening. By seven o'clock the next morning Roger would be alone in the camp. His four assistant youth leaders were to travel in the coaches with the boys. He himself would stay behind to supervise the removal of stores of food and equipment, to lock up the huts, speak to the caretaker, and make his

final inspection. On the second night from now, he would enjoy a silent dinner in his own flat in Notting Hill Gate; a dinner thought out and cooked with especial care for his homecoming by his elderly housekeeper, Mrs. Hedges.

Having endured the rigours of camp life for so many weeks it would have been natural for him to dwell a little on the pleasures he could look forward to on his return. He was not indifferent to physical comfort, though he did not exaggerate its importance. But visions of his flat, though they passed through his mind, did not distract him. They only served to steady the balance of his thought and to confirm his opinion of its wisdom.

He was totally preoccupied with the problem of Vic Stevens. The boy was daily becoming a more tiresome liability, one that he knew he must rid himself of by unkind means if gentle ones proved insufficient. For Vic, while wholly within his grasp emotionally, showed an intellectual freedom that Roger found very disconcerting. The boy had tested his own powers upon Macbeth, and had a shrewdly objective opinion of them. He was determined to find his way on to the stage, and prepared to use any means and any person to that end. He needed none of the mental encouragement Roger was willing and anxious to give him. Instead, he demanded emotional support, all that sympathy and love he had not been given by either of his parents. He asked for Roger's love in return for his own passion, and he would not accept the former's uncompromising refusal. He had sat in Roger's hut arguing for more than an hour on that last morning, while the rest of the camp were on the beach, working off the finals of the beach sports.

"I'm not going on living at home after I leave school at Christmas," he repeated, with the boring insistence of a child. "I won't be called up till next summer, and Mum'll want to put me in Uncle's business. He offered me a

position if I got my matric next term. I don't want his bloody position. If I've got to waste eighteen months in the army after next summer I must get some stage experience straight away."

"You know I don't quarrel with that. Except that I think it would be most unkind to your mother to leave her, on top of turning down her plans for you. Wouldn't it be rather a repetition of your father's conduct?"

Vic was shocked and angry.

"Good Lord, no! He had no excuse. Besides, he was supposed to be supporting me and Mum."

"Your mother may have been looking forward to the time when you would support her."

"She couldn't do that! After all, the old man gives her some sort of allowance. At least, I couldn't be expected to do it permanently. Naturally I'd give her part of what I earn. But I don't have to be living at home to do that, do I?"

"You won't be likely to earn more than your keep, if as much, for a good many years to come."

"Look here, are you on my side, or Mum's?"

"Yours. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting your mother."

Victor was checked. This sudden outcropping of the grand manner, as he privately thought it, disconcerted him, set him off-balance. Roger, seeing this, and hoping to avoid the fatigue and embarrassment of losing his temper with the boy, followed it up with crushing frankness.

"I am on your side in your choice of a career. You know that, and you ought to know that I don't easily change my mind over questions of that sort. But I have no intention of letting you share my flat with me. Even if I felt about you as you would like me to feel, and as I promise you I never will feel, I wouldn't dream of doing such a damned silly thing. You are old enough, surely, to appreciate how my

friends and acquaintances would look at such an arrangement. Not to mention Mrs. Hedges, and perhaps, with her connivance, the police."

Victor sat staring at the ground, secretly scandalised, outwardly defiant, all his romantic feelings lacerated by Roger's cool good sense. The latter followed up his advantage.

"I don't *like* hurting you," he said gently, watching nevertheless for that softening in his victim that would pronounce him once more vulnerable. "But you leave me no alternative. You demand the impossible. I am simply not the type to satisfy you. My tastes lie in other directions. That is not my fault. To judge by the usual moral standards it is considered a virtue, or at any rate a sign of normality."

He laughed a little, and Victor managed to smile back. The boy could not explain that his intentions had never ranged so far; that he had been thoroughly shocked by Roger's assumptions. But he was also inclined to be flattered, as the older man meant him to be, by the imputed motive of adult vice. It made their relationship exciting. His dramatic sense helped him to preserve the scene and with it his own dignity. In dropping the pure aspirations of the boy, he was able to establish a new kind of tragedy for his love. Far from abandoning, in the rôle of outcast, his former vague hopes, he felt himself raised to a new intimacy with Roger, a dangerous, uncertain intimacy, which would depend for its continuance upon his own powers of self-control. But an intimacy which bound him far more closely than before.

As if he had followed the boy's thoughts, Roger said, "After all, we shall both be in London. You can come to see me to talk things over, as the other chaps do. My time, as you know, is at the service of anyone in the clubs who wants to make use of it."

All Victor's better feelings rose to meet this statement of

universal accessibility. He throttled his natural jealousy, while his adoration made him feel that his heart would burst.

"I can manage, I expect, if you don't turn me down," he mumbled.

"Of course I won't turn you down."

Roger's hand on his shoulder propelled him to the open doorway. He went quietly, and did not try to see his friend again before the coaches started on their journey.

But Roger, sitting on the steps of his hut, considering his problem from all its angles, remained uneasy. He felt sure that he had taken the right line, the only line, in point of fact, that was open to him, unless he chose to dismiss the boy altogether. And that he was extremely unwilling to do. Victor's personality and Victor's art, in its present exciting promise, meant much to him. Why should he give up something that was essentially good and beautiful simply because it might get beyond his control? Experience warned him, but his inner self, demanding food for its supremacy, cried down the warning. Inevitably, answering this demand, he offered up the human sacrifice. He was aware that cruelty was involved, but he thought of it as a necessary pain. Pain was the common lot: he suffered continually himself. How then should others escape? Vic at least would have from him the kind of support and practical sympathy he needed. The boy was in luck. He himself had had no guiding hand, distinguished or otherwise, at a similar point in his career. If he had, things might have gone differently.

He sighed aloud, and a couple of boys, dragging a small handcart piled with luggage past his hut, looked at him, and then at one another, with reverent awe in their faces. "Monk" was somewhere in the clouds, all right. You could see that by his eyes, blank, unnoticing. They crept by, making no noise.

When Roger had finished his contemplation, he took

his letters to the pillar box. He did not remember as he pushed them through the slot that one was addressed to Kay. He did not think about her that evening, nor on the day following, when he travelled to Notting Hill Gate. Nothing in his first hectic week of resumed work in London reminded him of her. He did not remember her at all until the middle of September, when a letter she had written, having gone to the camp and been forwarded to the flat, required an answer of him. He rang her up and arranged to meet her for lunch the next day.

They met near the telephone booths in the Piccadilly Underground station. Roger was five minutes late, Kay two minutes early. The waiting interval made her very nervous, because the continuous movement and passage of so many hundreds of strange faces blurred Roger's image in her mind, and made her fear she would not recognise him, or he would fail to recognise her. But when she caught sight of him at last, emerging from behind a stout woman, with a vague look in his eyes and a worried expression about his mouth, she hurried forward at once to make herself known to him.

He took her by the elbow, at once distant and friendly. His cool voice apologised for keeping her waiting, and Kay immediately regretted her own punctuality. They walked up the stairs into the street in single file.

Roger's talent for easy amusing conversation was hard driven during their meal, for Kay was constrained and silent. She did not know how to talk to him in the crowded restaurant. They sat side by side, with a pair of business men opposite, who read newspapers and ate noisily. Kay found it difficult in such surroundings, with Roger so close to her, to concentrate on any topic. The uneasy delight of being with him again made her awkward and apparently unresponsive. Roger began to feel that he was labouring in vain.

"Have you been overworking?" he asked her suddenly.
"You look as if you might."

She concluded that she was not at her best in spite of all the care she had taken with her make-up and her hair. She felt even more depressed and strange.

"Not particularly. Why?"

"You are very silent."

"I'm sorry. I'm not terribly good at small talk."

He smiled at her.

"I adore small talk. Preferably gossip. Tell me some hospital gossip."

But she could not think of any. Instead she asked him about the camp and particularly for news of Victor Stevens.

"But perhaps you haven't seen him since you came back. He must have left the camp the week after I got back here."

"As a matter of fact he came down again for the last fortnight."

"Not to do any more acting?"

"Oh no. Actually, to help with the final packing up. It was his own idea, and as his school was not starting term till September, there was nothing against it."

"No, of course not."

She spoke emphatically, to deny the resentment of her own sudden jealousy. Roger said nothing.

"I thought he had left school."

"End of this term."

"Then what will he do?"

Roger signalled to the waiter and spoke again with his eyes on the bill and his hand poised above his open wallet.

"See a psychologist, I hope."

It was said so casually, in such a clear light tone, that Kay thought she had not heard him correctly. One of the

two business men raised his eyes from his paper, stared at them both, and abruptly stood up, reaching towards the wall for his hat.

"Why?" Kay asked flatly.

"Because he says he is seeing things, and I don't think that sounds quite normal, do you?"

"What sort of things?"

"People. Out of plays, mostly. They speak to him. He is sure they are not there, but he speaks his own part in the play back to them."

"Are you sure he is not just imagining it?"

"Of course he is imagining it. But he ought to know that, oughtn't he—not deny it?"

"Does he deny it?"

"He does, and he doesn't. That is why I think he ought to see a psychiatrist."

"Have you told him so?"

"I have not seen him since I got back. He writes me letters about it."

The bill had been paid, he had risen from his chair. There was no chance of continuing her enquiry, and Kay felt that Roger, in any case, wished to end it. But she was perplexed by his attitude towards the boy. His tone was callous, his public frankness on an intimate subject was disconcerting. But he evidently took a great and continuing interest in Victor, and was at work on his behalf. Her old feeling of pity for the boy returned, persisting in spite of her increased respect for Roger's ability and judgment.

They passed out into the street.

"I thought we might drift along to the Park," said Roger. "If you have nothing better to do."

They took a bus to Hyde Park Corner, then keeping in the shade of trees, wandered to the slopes above the Serpentine. Sheep grazed at a little distance from them; parked cars made a thick fringe at the lake edge, and beyond

this the water was streaked and slashed by the erratic passage of ill-steered boats.

"Too much life," said Roger, with faint disgust. "Will you risk the turf, or shall I find you a chair?"

"The turf is all right," said Kay, "apart from the sheep, I mean."

"I mind them and their remains less than the humans," said Roger, "though they are certainly very dingy, even for London."

Kay picked at the grass, then remembering that the sheep had grazed over the whole of this place, scattered it again.

"You don't really dislike people, do you?" she asked slowly. "It would be strange when your job is all among people and consists in working for them."

"I am very fond of the young," said Roger with his most disarming smile. "Perhaps that is why adults so often disappoint me."

Kay's heart felt all the pain of his disillusionment, and there was added to this the first prickings of her own frustration. She would not disappoint him, she knew. She had proved her capacity for love with Dennis; she was not approaching Roger empty-handed. Yet he made no move to take the comfort she had ready for him, offering it by her silence. He began instead to talk about children, especially boys, and about education and schools and parental care and housing conditions and a great many other very interesting and very difficult social problems. Fascinated by his wide knowledge and the keen incisive way he presented it, Kay forgot herself, listening intently and asking all the correctly intelligent questions. Roger's eyes glowed with pleasure as he looked at her fresh attentive face. He decided that he was already very fond of her. It had been a true instinct that had led him to cancel that afternoon's engagements; this encounter held far more importance for him.

"You must be terribly exhausted by my lengthy discourse," he said at last, laughing. "How about tea? Too early?"

Kay got to her feet, smiling her agreement. So long as he led the way and told her what they would do next, and looked at her with the queer light in his eyes that she took to be love, she found him irresistible.

"I ought really to do a little shopping first," she said. "Only it isn't any good because I have run out of coupons."

"Already?"

"I know. It seems dreadful, but I had to have a new mufti overcoat. My old one is a dyed Waaf relic and the fashion has changed completely now."

"You like to be fashionable?"

She flushed a little. She could not tell him that most of her new interest in clothes was taken for his sake.

"I expect it is because of wearing uniform so long," she lied. "That makes it more extravagant to buy new clothes to keep in with the fashion, but on the other hand I do sell my old ones. So it isn't extravagant in money: only in coupons."

He took his red book from his wallet and handed it to her.

"Have some of mine. I don't want them. At least, only enough for a few pairs of socks."

He counted rapidly.

"You can have ten if you like."

"Can I really?"

"Yes. I should not offer them if I wanted them for myself. I am a very selfish person."

She smiled at him with charming confidence.

"This proves it, of course."

"Now we will go and shop, unless you want to take me into one of those vast women's stores. I don't think I could face that."

"No, quite a small place. Rather a special one. Underclothes, I'm afraid."

"That I shall like. So long as I don't have to make my way through a sea of sweating predatory women, carrying very heavy parcels for you."

"If I get my things, you must buy your socks. Or shall I knit them for you? Wool costs fewer coupons."

"That would be grand. We will get some wool and you shall come and knit them at my flat."

"I should like to see your flat," she said dreamily, as they walked away through the park.

"Of course you shall see my flat."

She imagined they would go there after tea, and that he would then take her in his arms and kiss her for the first time. It would be the natural, almost the inevitable, conclusion of their long happy afternoon together.

The shopping was a success. They were both so gay and happy that they infected the shop assistants with their good humour, as on a former occasion they had infected the owner of the cottage garden at Springstead. During tea they unpacked their purchases to look at them, rather to the indignation of some suburban ladies at the next table to their own.

But after the meal was over Roger parted from her quite abruptly. He had to go straight to one of his South London clubs, he said. He put her on a bus which would take her nearly to the door of her hospital, watched her out of sight, then took another bus to Notting Hill Gate, where he was expecting a friend of his old theatre days for dinner.

Kay travelled home, unknissed, but glowing with contentment. Her evening would be passed alone. As she had expected to spend it with Roger she had put off Derek Crawford, and she could not now go back to the former arrangement. But she did not mind this anticlimax. There had been none of the ecstasy of Springstead about her

renewed contact with Roger, but neither had she suffered the distress of the last day of her holiday, with its uncomfortable walk on the headland. She subdued her impatience. Roger governed her heart, and therefore her life. He must rule it in his own way and in his own time.

She spent her evening winding wool for his socks, and reading Shakespeare's sonnets on the subject of love.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM THAT AFTERNOON Kay met Roger about once a week. Very often they went to the theatre, or to a concert, but usually they visited Roger's flat first for tea. They never dined there, however, and he always set her on her way home before he left her. Occasionally he was obliged to ring her up to cancel their meeting; twice she found herself kept at the hospital when her off-duty time was changed without warning. But these impediments occurred rarely, and Kay found the weeks spinning past more and more rapidly, in a rhythm of alternate richness and poverty, warmth and chill, full life for one exalted day, followed by a thin dreamlike existence for six more. She went sometimes to the local cinema with Derek Crawford, but she had made it plain to him that she had a major interest elsewhere, though she did not talk to him about Roger. For his part he was not sufficiently attracted by her to want to find out any details. He liked her, but on closer acquaintance he knew that she was not his type, besides being older than himself. In the ward Sister Blakeley suspected nothing. She still approved of Kay's progress in her profession.

Kay continued to wait upon Roger's pleasure with patience and forbearance. The particular aura of authority and beauty with which he surrounded himself and his life worked powerfully in clouding her vision, and in preventing her from taking an objective view of her situation. It also prevented her from confiding in her friends, for there was nothing tangible to confide. Roger was not her lover; he

never touched her except to guide her through crowds or across the street. But he held her imagination so close and drained her heart so deep that sometimes, after she had left him, she wondered if she had any longer a separate identity. She was totally obsessed by her love, but the story of it would not fill a half sheet of writing paper. She shrank from communicating to others something at once so intimate and so uneventful. Judy Howard became tired of asking her for news and receiving none. She concluded that Kay was having no success, and that Bob had, as usual, made a better forecast than her own.

In this secretive mood Kay was detached from her ordinary surroundings of hospital and country home. Roger's flat became for her the ideal environment, the centre of all her hopes, the church of her salvation. It was a small flat, part of a Victorian house in a formerly fashionable district, with a decaying little front garden full of rank grass and grotesque angular laurels, very thin of leaf. The wall protecting this garden from the pavement was chipped and peeling, though the house itself, mended after bomb damage, looked fresh enough, with a new coat of paint. Kay never really saw the wall or the garden, or even the cream-coloured walls of the house, because the first time she went there Roger had been with her, and after that she saw nothing as she arrived until she stood before his discreet dark front door at the top of plain polished wooden stairs.

His flat took in the whole of the first floor of the house. There was a big, long-windowed sitting room, the former drawing-room, and adjoining it, separated by folding doors, a back drawing-room, which he used as a dining room. There were several doors on the other side of the small hall which had been a landing, and Kay supposed that these were his bedroom and the housekeeper's room and the kitchen. She never went into any of these rooms during

her first visit to the flat. There was a bathroom at the turn of the stairs, just inside the front door.

It occurred to Kay more than once, looking round the quiet well-chosen furniture of Roger's sitting room, that he must have private means besides whatever salary his social work brought him. His taste was simple and good, and therefore not inexpensive. His housekeeper, Mrs. Hedges, trained and obviously competent, proved this, if proof were needed, by the excellence of her teas and the way she served them.

At her first visit, which took place one evening towards six o'clock, Roger placed Kay where she could see through the windows the yellowing leaves of the plane trees across the road, provided her with a generous gin and lime, and waited for her to disclose herself.

But Kay was not to be hurried. They had travelled together from Westminster Bridge, where they had arranged to meet, and now she was drugged and drowning in her love. The room, so like him that it seemed equally familiar, aroused in her no criticism but only a further heavenly contentment. Roger began to feel impatience. He shivered a little.

"This enormous room is very nice in the summer," he said, crossing to look out of the window. "But it can be damned cold in the winter. It is the very devil to heat, with that sliding door into the dining room and this window and all."

Kay had not thought the room enormous, only suitably spacious for a person of Roger's standing and attributes. She looked up and down. She could not honestly agree. It was a fair size, but no more. She had an aunt in Kensington with a drawing room that was truly enormous, a journey to cross. This one was homely beside it.

"It is a lovely room," she said with conviction, avoiding the issue. "You are not allowed very much coal, I suppose?"

"What I do get goes to bring Mrs. Hedges' den up to furnace temperature. She gives me a few nobbs to start with, and wood to follow—or possibly a few foul coalites."

"But they work all right if the fire is hot enough when you put them on."

"The fire is never hot enough. That must be why they merely darken it."

"I'll show you how to manage them," said Kay lovingly, and then stopped, confused, because it was only mid-September, and warm for the time of year. And in any case they were going to the theatre that evening.

"So you shall," said Roger with warmth.

It was a year or two since a woman, other than a relative, had sat in that room, and five years since it had held anyone at all dear to him. He found Kay increasingly charming and very restful. It was pleasant to have a woman so obviously concerned for his comfort. True, Mrs. Hedges "studied" him, and often told him so, but that was hardly the same thing.

"I find as I get more middle-aged that creature comforts begin to be very important," he said with a laugh.

"You aren't middle-aged!"

He had never looked more boyish, she thought, than in making that preposterous claim. She was sure he could not be sincere.

"I very definitely am middle-aged. I was forty three months ago."

"Forty isn't middle age—for a man, anyway. Perhaps for a woman."

"Your sex wouldn't thank you for that. They all seem to consider themselves girls at fifty."

"Don't!"

She did not like the undercurrent of relish in his disgust. He began instantly to talk about books. Thinking over their conversation afterwards she was amazed to find how

quickly he had understood her discomfort. He was quick—too quick—in reading her thoughts. Their minds, when they were alone talking together, were like two clasped lovers. But she reminded herself that he never touched her except to guide her across a street.

After her first visit to the flat Kay found she was able to begin her much postponed novel. Her slight bewilderment over Roger's conduct made her all the more eager to please him, and to prove her worth and her gratitude for the interest he was taking in her work. It crossed her mind that his view of his maturity might be holding back his natural feelings. If he regarded himself as middle-aged, even elderly, he might consider her too young for an adult partnership. She rejected this suggestion as soon as it occurred to her. She was thirty, no longer a girl; the ten years between them, at their present ages, meant nothing. And that was not the way of a man in love, middle-aged or otherwise. But if he were not in love with her, all his conduct towards her was unexplained. A man of experience would not, surely, attempt so impossible a thing as a platonic friendship of real depth. He never showed the slightest sign of eccentricity. So he must be in love with her. Her delicacy of thought demanded this simple explanation.

When she had written three chapters of her book she took the manuscript to Roger's flat. As usual he was waiting for her, and as usual when she came in the afternoon, Mrs. Hedges brought in tea and set it on a small table near the fire. Until they had eaten Roger kept the room, with curtains undrawn, in the sad blue light of an October dusk, while the log fire made dancing shadows on his well-polished furniture. After Mrs. Hedges had taken the tray away, he turned on one shaded light and drew the curtains together.

"Now read me what you have done," he said, settling back into his chair.

"Not aloud."

"Why not?"

"I read so badly, and—I feel shy about reading my own things."

"O—oh!" It was a gentle sound, full of pity and tenderness, with a hint, too, of disappointment.

"Will you read it for me?"

"Is it typed?"

"Oh yes. But there are corrections."

"I'm sure there are. There will be more, no doubt. How many drafts of your work do you usually make?"

"Only a fair copy after I've corrected the original typescript. That is, for the magazine stories. This is the first novel I've tried to write."

"The first big step forward."

"I want it to be that."

Her voice was rough with the intensity of her passion. Roger let his eyes rest on hers until she dropped them to the pages on her knee. He held out his hand. Kay did not mistake his meaning: she gave him the white pages of her manuscript.

He read well. His quick mind gave him time to interpret instantly what he saw on the page, and his early training had taught him how to manage his voice, and how to give a natural turn to dialogue. She soon lost her embarrassment, and began to take a professional interest in the more glaringly obvious faults in her work.

"I shall have to do a lot to that before any publisher is likely to look at it," she said when he had finished.

He laughed with pleasure at her frankness. She was taking the right attitude; not expecting fulsome praise or flattery.

"You will," he answered, "but there is no reason why you should mind that. Think of Balzac."

"No. I can't bear to. It's like thinking of Niagara."

"It is, rather. Well, think of—"

"Don't remind me of great writers. I shall get too discouraged."

"You mustn't. You can do a lot with this; it is well worth polishing. The important thing is that as a result of reading it, I want the next instalment—*now*."

"You truly want to know what happens next?"

"Yes, I do. Quite honestly, and rather badly."

"Then I'll go on with it."

A shade crossed his face.

"Don't you want it yourself? I mean, don't you feel it must be written?"

"Yes, in a way."

Her tone was doubtful but he felt that her hesitation was due to natural modesty rather than to any infirmity of purpose. On the whole he was very pleased with her.

"You deserve a special prize. It is too late for a theatre, as I was afraid it might be, so we will have a very extra special meal."

"You haven't made Mrs. Hedges—?"

"No. How would Maison Basque suit you?"

"I have never been there."

"All the better."

She would have preferred to stay at his fireside, but he wanted to make this an occasion, and she enjoyed more and more the luxury of being ruled. So she obediently got herself ready and they went out together, Roger's arm linked through hers all the way to the nearest taxi rank.

As if to offset his affectionate manner to her, Roger, during their meal, was more than usually heartless at the expense of his colleagues. One of them, he told Kay, was known to be suffering from cystitis. The man himself put it down to a particularly noxious kind of mineral water served in the club canteen, but Roger had a shrewd suspicion that he had just acquired a mistress, and was overdoing things. Again, one of the most reliable of the secretaries at

the central office of the clubs was absent on extended leave on account of a family bereavement. Roger happened to know it was because the man she was in love with had put his head in the gas oven.

"She found him, poor woman," he explained to Kay with a faint smile. "I should think it will turn out for the best. He was a homosexual, so she can never have got much out of it, can she?"

Kay supposed these stories were true, since there was no reason for Roger to invent them. He handed them to her as trifles of amusing gossip, which horrified her not a little as she considered their content. It was one thing for the doctors at the hospital to make the grosser type of joke at the expense of their patients; they were, after all, doing all that lay in their power to heal them. It was quite another thing for Roger to show such Olympian disregard for the sufferings or tragedies of his fellow-workers. It confused her and made her uncomfortable, but she could not find it in her heart to scold him. After all, he worked for others as much as the doctors did. Besides, she enjoyed too much the pleasures of adoring subservience. Also she was his guest, and the evening was undoubtedly hers.

As it was still early after the meal, and Roger did not suggest going back to the flat, they walked through St. James's to the Mall, from thence to Trafalgar Square, and so on to the Embankment, where they leaned their elbows on the parapet, watching the river coiling blackly below them.

"What will you do when you go home this evening?" Roger asked.

"Gossip a little. Mend some of my dilapidated clothes, perhaps. A very thankless job, that. I might read a book."

"You won't be writing?"

"Not tonight. But I will tomorrow. I'll try to do a chapter a week for you."

"That will be very handsome. Dickens kept his readers waiting a month or more."

"I do wish you wouldn't keep talking about the classics. It makes me feel phoney, somehow."

"No, you mustn't. I haven't flattered you or suggested you are a great writer. But you have talent; no one would deny that. There is no need for false modesty."

"Is it false?"

Her voice was wistful and hesitant. He did not answer her. She thought his profile looked a little bored. She tried to change the subject of their conversation.

"I am going on the Children's Block next week. It ought to be rather fun, but very hard work. A nice change, though, from grumbling old women. Children are nearly well as soon as they stop being ill, if you see what I mean."

"I know. It is a remarkable power in them. I suppose you mean young children? The adolescents go into adult wards, don't they? I always think it must be very bad for them to hear the grownups discussing their loathsome diseases in the particularly foul way they usually do."

"It is rather. Yes, they have them in the Children's Block from nought to twelve. I shall enjoy it."

"I envy you. My job is all adolescents, and boys at that. I do get a bit weary of their monotonous troubles. But I am very fond indeed of small children. I think I ought to have married."

Kay's heart throbbed painfully. There did not seem to be anything she could say. Roger was looking at her dreamily.

"You ought to marry, of course. You'd make a good wife."

"You ought to marry, too," said Kay with difficulty. He smiled at her.

"I'm too old now. I don't believe I could give up the joys of solitude after keeping them for so long."

"There would be compensations," said Kay gravely.

He laughed.

"True. But I wonder if I could stand living with the same woman for ever and ever."

"It would depend."

It would depend upon whether you truly loved her, thought Kay, but she did not complete her thought aloud. She was sickeningly disturbed. She did not know what he was trying to tell her. His whole conversation this evening had assumed an intimacy greater than she had experienced with any man, not excluding Dennis. She might have been Roger's long-established mistress.

"I think you ought to marry," she repeated stupidly.

Roger decided it was time for her to go home. It had been a delightful evening; he had never been more fond of her. He did not want to risk the intrusion of uncontrolled feelings, or precipitate a difficult situation. Above all, he must not jeopardise the novel; it had become of the first importance to him. So he turned from the parapet with a cheerful laugh, and taking her arm above the elbow in a warm energetic grip, led her away. Kay went dumbly, bewildered, but soothed and made happy again for the moment by physical contact, even of so slight a nature.

This troubled evening should have given her, if she had been capable of receiving commonsense impressions where Roger was concerned, a clear warning of the superficial nature of his feeling for her. But she was far too deeply in love to make any rational deductions from his words or behaviour. He, for his part, felt he had been honest with her, short of downright brutality, from the ugliness of which he never failed to shrink. This belief in his own probity, added to his conviction that he still guided her talent, made him continue in his former course. And Kay naturally interpreted this to her own advantage. She still thought that he had scruples on account of his consciousness of middle age or on account of his work, or from some

unrevealed diffidence. She had known almost from the start that she was not dealing with an uncomplicated nature. Roger had an artist's temperament, however little he made use of it, and she was prepared for violent fluctuations in his mood and conduct. And when she doubted most, and was most inclined to see with dispassionate eyes, her mind went back to her holiday, to their parting at the gate of the bungalow, and how he had looked at her then. When she remembered that consuming look, her faith in his love was inevitably renewed.

So they continued to meet, and Kay wrote several more chapters of her book, which she read aloud to Roger with much inward misgiving, all too easily dispelled by his praise and helpful criticism. The weeks slipped by to mid-November in unexacting companionship. Only once during this time Kay rebelled. She had disagreed over an alteration Roger demanded. He was patient; she was stubborn. She was even a little angry.

"Am I writing this book, or are you?"

"You are, of course."

"Then don't be such a Svengali."

He stared at her for a long time, dark and withdrawn, until she began to be frightened of what she had done.

"I'm sorry," she managed to say at last. "I ought not to have said that. It wasn't fair."

"It wasn't quite, was it?"

He laughed, went to his gramophone and put on a Brandenburg concerto. There was no more novel reading that night.

In the third week of November they decided one evening, without previous arrangement, to go to the theatre. They were both in a cheerful mood, a little reckless, prepared to enjoy anything. Kay suggested a new play with a safe richness of stars to guarantee enjoyment. Roger would have preferred something experimental, but Kay was sure it

would be depressing. As he was feeling indulgent and did not want to destroy the charm of her gentle liveliness, he gave in to her wish.

They found the play unexpectedly moving, not at all the conventional comedy it had promised to be, but a tragic situation saved from passing on to disaster by an act of simple touching self-sacrifice. In their loosened mood they were not ashamed to give expression to their feelings. At the end of it they dried their eyes and blew their noses in company with most of the rest of the audience, and went off happily arm in arm to find recuperation in a meal.

"I hate partings," said Roger, eating heartily, "especially when it is obvious from the plot that they are going to be final."

"So do I," agreed Kay.

She could speak like this because she no longer mourned Dennis in the very slightest degree. She kept a loving memory of him, but nothing else. She no longer had any difficulty in speaking of things that related to him.

"I am always thankful," Roger went on, still eating heartily, and looking round with interest at the other people in the restaurant, "that I never had a parting scene with the person who meant most to me. It was coming, and I saw it coming. Fortunately her husband's job took them to another part of the country quite suddenly when I was abroad. I came back and she had gone. It was bad, but a parting scene would have been worse."

Kay felt quite cold in the pit of her stomach. One part of her wanted to run away from a truth that destroyed all her facile explanations of his conduct to her, substituting a view too terrible to be borne; the other part of her thirsted eagerly for more.

"When was this?" she asked casually.

"Oh, about five years ago. The end of it, that is to say.

It had been going on for some time. I was very fond of her. I would have married her."

In a sudden burst of rage at his arrogance Kay wanted to say, "But would she have married you?" She refrained, however, waiting for more, for the whole story, though every sentence pierced her.

"Didn't her husband want to divorce her?"

"He never had a clue. We were very discreet." He smiled gently, deprecating her want of taste. She felt herself redden. "Besides, there were children. She couldn't bear to give them up."

He put his knife and fork together, and took up the menu to look for the next course.

"It all seems a long time ago. I do see her occasionally, even now. I am still very fond of her."

He spoke quietly and with dignity, feeling again the small stirrings of a long-buried grief, which had been hardly borne and conquered with difficulty.

Kay was shattered. Jealousy, despair, pity, and frantic love swept her by turns. She could not look at Roger. She stared at the tablecloth until its whiteness flooded her brain, numbing as snow.

An ice was brought for her. She ate it mechanically, with a bitter inward laugh for its appositeness. It was no colder than her heart.

"Cheer up," said Roger.

She forced herself to look at him. He was smiling at her, but there was no amusement in his smile, and no affection. She shivered.

He took her to her bus stop, apologising on the way for talking so much about himself. Several buses arrived at the stop, but not the right one.

"It'll be along in a minute," he assured her. "As I said before, I hate partings, so I think I won't wait."

"I hate partings too," said Kay, and added in a low

voice, slowly, as though the words were being forced from her, "I feel as if I were tearing myself in two."

"Oh, but you mustn't!"

His voice was clear, light, and controlled as it always was. There was no distress in it, no annoyance, no pity, no shame, no feeling of any kind.

Kay turned from the terror of it, flung herself into the enveloping crowd on the pavement, and hurried out of his sight. She walked on and on until she was out of breath, and had to stop to discover where she was.

She found another bus stop, stood in the queue there, and travelled back to the hospital. She had betrayed herself, she had practically thrown herself at Roger's feet. Knowing by this time his colossal pride, she had no hope of retrieving her fault. There was nothing to be done. She was doubly excluded from his life, by his former love that he still held enshrined, and by her own impulsive folly. The shock to her was so great that she felt no pain, only a necessity to hide herself, even from her own mind. She lay awake through the night, staring at a black and empty void.

CHAPTER IX

ON A RAW GREY MORNING in December Cecilia Ward was thrown suddenly into a most unusual state of confusion. The whole thing took shape in a matter of minutes. At ten o'clock the ward was in perfect order, patients lying quiet, washed and fed and tended, Sister Blakeley at her desk, turning over the papers but really waiting for Dr. Mathers to arrive, Staff nurse hovering, attending to minor matters. At two minutes past ten the hospital dispensary delivered in the passage outside the ward a basket of drugs and applications comprising a good many glass bottles of variously coloured fluids. At six minutes past ten Nurse Gwendolen Oldham began to transfer these bottles from the basket to a trolley, ready to convey them to the ward laboratory, where Sister Blakeley would presently check them and lock them up in the drug cupboard. At seven minutes past ten the ward-maid, carrying a tray loaded with cups and saucers, and looking back over her shoulder at the retreating tall figure of the dispensary assistant who had brought up the basket, walked into Nurse Oldham's trolley, let go her tray to save herself, tripped over the basket standing on the floor, and fell heavily amid a general crash and clatter.

Nurse Oldham's yelp of dismay brought Sister into the passage in a matter of seconds. The ward-maid, climbing to her feet with a hand clutching her disturbed bosom, began an impassioned attack on the trolley, the basket and Nurse Oldham.

"Be quiet," said Sister sharply.

To her own surprise the ward-maid stopped accusing her environment.

"Nurse Oldham, what is the meaning of this?"

Gwen Oldham, rather shaken, answered doubtfully.

"She walked straight into the trolley. She can't have been looking. It isn't a thing you could miss seeing."

"Of course not. But why were you in the middle of the corridor at all?"

Nurse Oldham moved her feet uneasily.

"Laziness, I suppose," went on Sister, warming to the occasion and exasperated by the extra work for herself which it entailed. "How often have I told you to unpack the basket in the ward lab.? Have you forgotten?"

"No, Sister. But he put it down here in the corridor, and I'm not strong enough to lift it with all the bottles in it."

"Why didn't you ask him to put it in the lab.?"

"He was gone before I had time to."

"Laziness again. If any of you can think of a simple way of shirking part of a job, or even the whole of it, you do so. Talk about hospital service free for all," Sister went on bitterly and quite irrelevantly, "a fat lot of service the silly people are likely to get. Mesmerised by the word free, and too ignorant to realise service is never given free, and never given freely either these days! You can clear up this mess between you, while I get the dispensary on the 'phone. Three—no, four—bottles of medicine, and goodness knows which, now. They'll have to send someone up to check what's left and renew the rest. Six cups, four saucers, three jugs, a teapot. Did you *throw* the tray at the trolley, Eva?"

"No, Sister." The ward-maid was more subdued by the fire in Sister Blakeley's eye than by the shock of her fall. "My foot slipped and the next thing I knew the trolley knocked the tray out of my hand."

"She wasn't looking where she was going," persisted Gwen.

"I shall not defend either of you," said Sister from the end of the corridor, the house telephone in her hand. "If you both get hauled over the coals by the management committee, you richly deserve it."

Both girls, silenced by this prospect, united in their efforts to remove broken glass and crockery from a forbidding pool of multi-coloured fluid. Sister scolded the dispensary.

At this juncture Dr. Mathers turned briskly into the passage from the main corridor, followed by Derek Crawford.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo!" he said cheerfully. "Irresistible force meets immovable mass. Who won?"

The girls grew very red in the face but did not venture an answer. Crawford's eyes brightened at the sight of glorious ruin. Sister spoke a brief final word to the dispensary and rang off.

"I'm very sorry, Dr. Mathers," she said, coming towards him with her elderly face set into its most severe lines. "Discipline is not what it was in my training days."

"It never will be again," said Dr. Mathers, in a voice that expressed neither approval nor the opposite. He paused to analyse the accident. "Trays are a very unsafe way of moving breakable stuff, but I suppose they are convenient and quick. As for trolleys on wheels, they were not designed to carry medicine bottles. Why don't you store the things in a cupboard?"

"I do when I have checked them," said Sister. "The basket had no business to be left in the passage here. It should have been put in the lab., where the medicine cupboard is. Nurse is only supposed to transfer the drugs from the basket to the trolley in the lab., and then tell me, and I check them and put them away."

Dr. Mathers had moved on as she was speaking, and by

the time she had finished her explanation was walking down the centre of the ward.

"That pro. doesn't look any too bright," he said. "All the same, it seems simple enough, just to put things out of a basket on to a trolley."

"I don't think it was altogether her fault; the basket should not have been left in the passage," repeated Sister. "And Eva should have been looking where she was going."

Dr. Mathers examined his patients and said no more of the disaster until he was leaving the ward. A large wet stain in the passage recalled it to his mind.

"Now if it had been Nurse Lawson, I can't help feeling she might have seen the batty ward-maid before she threw the tray at her. I miss Lawson from Cecilia," he added seriously.

"I did when she went over to Children's," answered Sister. "But I'm not sure now that I mind. You won't repeat this, but Sister Jackson is a bit worried about her, as I was in the spring."

Dr. Mathers gave her a quick look.

"Why?"

"Well, she seems to have lost interest in her work again, and the children don't care for her. This is strictly between you and me, sir."

"Of course. Is she finding the work too much for her? She is not a very tough sort of girl, I'm afraid."

"She didn't find it too much in the summer. In fact right up to leaving Cecilia she was doing very well."

"She must miss your influence," said Dr. Mathers, smiling. "We'll have to get her transferred back to you."

"Not before she's done her proper training," said Sister, shaking her head. "And it's not for me to say. You'll have to get round Matron if you want to make that sort of change."

"Strictly between you and me," said Dr. Mathers, imitating Sister Blakeley's former manner, "Matron eats out of my hand."

Sister's face relaxed into a broad grin at the outrageous inaccuracy of this claim. It was well-known throughout the hospital that a perpetual feud was waged between Dr. Mathers, the youngest, most up-to-date, and most energetic of the three physicians, and Matron, heavily reliant upon her forty years of experience. His more extravagant innovations met with no success: Matron, by devious methods known only to herself, saw to it that the management committee should be convinced of their impracticability. All this was fully appreciated by Sister Blakeley, who had at times acted as Matron's willing auxiliary. She shook her head at Dr. Mathers, holding the ward door open for him respectfully. She saw that his thoughts had already moved back to his work.

"Bed Twelve is going to pull out, I think—just," he said. "She's doing better than I would have believed possible last week. Keep up the good work."

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Mathers took a last thoughtful look down the ward, then with a smile and nod to Sister, turned and shot through the door into the corridor, heading for his men's beds in Jerome Ward, and firing off less important instructions to his houseman as he went.

When she had closed the door of the ward Sister took another look at the difficult case in Bed Twelve, who was, with the assistance of penicillin, defying a bacterial onslaught of normally lethal intensity. Both she and the patient were justly proud of their efforts.

"He's very pleased with you," said Sister, tucking in six inches of sheet that had escaped the notice of Staff nurse. "You must keep it up and we'll soon have you running races down the ward."

The patient, who had difficulty in lifting one weak arm, fumbled for Sister's hand and pressed it.

"Not 'arf," she whispered huskily.

Sister went back to her table to make out a list of break-ages. Armed with this she went to the ward kitchen to confront Eva with the enormity, in cold print, of her recent misdeed. But Eva had gone: to give in her notice, Nurse Oldham said. Sister, inwardly cursing the whole tribe of touchy, lazy, slapdash, so-called hospital workers, retired to her desk again. Woe betide the next generation, she thought, when she and her kind were gone, and these work-shy good-for-nothings had to fend for themselves.

Meanwhile Dr. Mathers continued his round, and at the end of it, parting from Crawford in the main hall of the hospital, went to the registrar's room to dictate some reports and letters to general practitioners. This done, he looked at his watch. He found that he would have time to slip along to the children's block, a project he had had in mind since his conversation with Sister Blakeley. A colleague's case which he had been invited to see gave him just the excuse he needed.

He went in quietly, prepared to be received by Sister with the usual ceremony, but hoping to secure a few minutes to himself to achieve his main object in being there. He was lucky. Sister was bending over a cot at the far end of the ward, while Kay Lawson, or rather a pale ghost of the girl he looked for, was tucking in a fretful child only a few yards away from him.

He was shocked by the change in her. It lay, not so much in her physical appearance, though she looked thinner than he remembered her, but in the fixity and implied suffering of her expression. Never pretty, her face had been capable, when she was happy, of a kind of glowing sweetness and gaiety that aroused instant pleasure. Unlighted, her

features were almost plain. She was as dreary as a landscape of fields on a wet day.

As he watched her he perceived yet more to disquiet him. The child she was tending derived no comfort at her hands. He looked up into her face, his own small features wrinkled and smeared with crying; his body, which he refused to stretch at full length, was crouched in a half sitting position and yet sagged over with fatigue. He looked thoroughly miserable. Kay's hands moved about him gently enough, but it was obvious to Dr. Mathers, as it was to the protesting child, that her attention was far away.

Moving to the foot of the cot, Mathers spoke to her.

"Good-morning, Nurse. Is Sister Jackson available? Dr. Bentham asked me to see a case in here."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her."

She was perfectly polite and controlled, and not at all surprised to see him. Not interested either. He began to wonder if his first impression had been false, a trick of the light as he stood just inside the door. It was a mistake to carry a passion for analysis, for diagnosis, into every aspect of life, his own and other people's. It was, perhaps, grossly impertinent. Why imagine hidden strains and stresses in the life of young Kay Lawson? The explanation of her pallor and vacuity might well be the recurring physiological one.

But he was not satisfied. Sister Blakeley had reported some definite change in the girl. Blakeley was a shrewd old bird with a first-rate knowledge of nurses and their ways. She never spoke idly of her colleagues or subordinates. When he had examined Dr. Bentham's case he led the conversation round to staff problems.

"Have you enough nurses here?" he asked. "You can't very well telescope the work in this ward."

"We just manage," said Sister. She was a youngish woman, with very neat hair and nicely calculated make-up.

"I see you have got one of my Cecilia pros. Is she coming along properly?"

"Kay Lawson?" A shade crossed Sister's face. "She tries very hard, but either she just doesn't care for children, or she's badly run down. She does everything I tell her to, but not a single thing on her own. She looks so tired all the time I feel like sending her off duty. But she insists that there is nothing the matter with her."

This long speech confirmed Dr. Mathers' fears. He crossed the ward to confront Kay with them.

"Can I have a word with you, Nurse Lawson?"

They moved into a window recess where there were wash-hand basins. To cover their talk he began to wash his hands.

"You don't look very well," he said bluntly. "I noticed it when I came in and Sister is of the same opinion. I think you had better report for an overhaul."

Kay flushed. It was the first time anyone had acknowledged that they found a change in her. She had believed that nothing showed on the surface. Dismayed, she determined to put off any unwelcome probing. But she could not avoid the immediate danger.

"I feel all right," she said defensively.

"You mustn't mind my asking. My job is to keep an eye on you girls while you are training. Unless you have an outside doctor of your own. Have you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I can't make you report sick if you don't want to, but I strongly advise you to come along. You don't want to be a possible source of danger to others, do you?"

She smiled at the absurdity of such an idea, but gave in to his insistence. Nothing, however, was found: routine examination and X-ray of her chest discovered no abnormality. She did not reveal her inner mind.

"Family all well?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"No personal worries?"

"Why should there be?"

She had paused before making this answer, and Dr. Mathers seized upon its inconclusiveness.

"I don't want to pry into your affairs, but no one can give a good account of himself if he is nursing a grievance or getting tangled up in any way. As your doctor, interested in your health, you ought to help me. I am not acting now as a hospital physician, but as your personal doctor."

"You are very kind, Dr. Mathers. I do appreciate it, and I'm sorry to seem so terribly churlish. But—there isn't anything I can tell you. There isn't anything at all. I shall be all right. There really isn't anything the matter with me."

He was looking at her in the speculative way he sometimes looked at patients in the ward. Living in such a close community, with a purely medical environment, the emphasis was always upon physical health. Appearances were watched and noted. She wondered if he would ask her whether she was afraid she might be going to have a baby. Whenever one of the nurses looked worried, and was ill in a vague sort of way, that was what everyone else thought and began to ask one another. She reflected with great bitterness how impossible it was that such a thing should happen to her. Roger had neither loved nor desired her. He had merely enjoyed her companionship. She had lifted some of the burden of his loneliness, but he had made it perfectly plain to her that she in no way compensated him for the loss of his mistress. That love was set apart from and above her. The sharp claws of her jealousy, which tore at her own flesh, could neither pull down that love nor rend it apart.

She put on her nurse's uniform again while Dr. Mathers wrote out a prescription for her.

"I am going to give you an old-fashioned tonic," he said.

"It will help you along until you sort out your present trouble, whatever it is."

Somehow he did not feel inclined to name the trouble specifically as a boy-friend. With many of the girls there he would have made no bones of the matter and had it out of them in less than five minutes. But Kay was different. He knew she had endured a major grief; its shadow might be upon her still.

Kay took her prescription to the dispensary. As she waited for it to be made up she considered her interview with Dr. Mathers. Though she had not confided in him and would never do so, his attention had been good for her. She understood now that she could not cut off her spirit from the living world without betraying its absence. It was not enough to bury her sorrow and her longing. She must renounce her love, for Roger's sake as much as for her own, and for the good, too, of the hospital, which needed her undisturbed efforts. Dr. Mathers was human; he even wanted to help her. Derek Crawford might take her out again if she gave him any encouragement. After all, the world was full of people. There was no absolute need to be alone. Though it required more courage than she was yet able to muster, she might in time look forward to finding Roger's successor. She dragged her spirit up from its prostration to her grief. There were always compensations of human kindness and friendliness. She would grasp them, and hold them fast.

Above all, she would accept the fact that her writing prospered. She had been afraid to acknowledge this, even to herself. But the writing undoubtedly prospered. Roger had been right when he spoke of the stimulus of pain. While he had held and cosseted her talent she had done very little. After she had cast herself loose from him by her self-betrayal, the novel had possessed her. Some of her diffidence with Dr. Mathers had been the necessity of

explaining this. Her preoccupation in the ward was not all self-pity. As often as not she was submerged in the flood of her imaginings. Her characters stood so closely around her that she could not see past them. She dared not explain this to anyone at the hospital. Probably they would not understand her, but whether they did or not they would send her away and she would lose her independence. She was prepared at all costs to defend this.

As a result of his interview with Kay, Dr. Mathers recommended her a week's leave at Christmas and decided to make a point of mentioning her to Derek Crawford. What he himself was debarred from doing by age and position, Crawford might very well perform. Dr. Mathers, who never suffered from diffidence, but drove straight ahead wherever his energetic impetuous spirit suggested, could not have chosen a more unfortunate course. On hearing Kay's name, Crawford immediately became wary.

"Nothing serious, I suppose?" he asked when Mathers told him he had recommended a week's sick leave for her.

"I hope not. It's the emotional side of her that's sick. She doesn't get enough fun. You know her, don't you, Derek? Couldn't you take her out a bit and cheer her up?"

Crawford winced visibly. The old man was going a damned sight too far. Interfering old beggar. He said stiffly, "I'm afraid I happen to be working for my Membership. I don't take much time off at the moment."

Dr. Mathers' proposal jarred all the more heavily on him because he had twice quite recently thought of seeing Kay again, but had been discouraged by her stony looks and dull eyes whenever he passed her going about the hospital.

Dr. Mathers had the sense to see that he had blundered, though he did not realise how gravely. He hastened to atone by speaking encouragingly about Crawford's prospects for his forthcoming examination. But once outside the

hospital and driving himself to his consulting rooms, his sense of frustration and helplessness where Kay was concerned discovered an appropriate scapegoat in his unenterprising convention-bound houseman. A dull dog. The Membership indeed! He would never get it! He would become a general practitioner in the provinces, marry early and enjoy unlimited respectability.

CHAPTER X

KAY'S HOME AT Crimpfield lay on the outskirts of the village, at a bend of the road curving in to the foot of the South Downs. A public footpath, worn down to the chalk, but muddied over by soil fallen from the low banks on either side of it, went up past the garden hedge and between two sparsely cultivated fields to the down beyond. There it turned, as it met the hill, to slide up it sideways in an easy gradient, cut back here and there in bare white chalk, but for the most part turf-covered, strewn with stones and the droppings of sheep and rabbits. The down overshadowed the house and garden, which were of a comfortable size and extent, dwarfing both by the majestic sweep of its ancient skyline.

Kay went home three days before Christmas. On account of her work she had not been able to decide upon a train until the last moment, so there was no one to meet her, and no taxi in the small station yard, a mile and a half from Crimpfield itself.

The train, a small branch line one she had changed into at Lewes, puffed away from the station in its comfortable leisurely country fashion. After it was gone Kay crossed the line and made her way out by the level-crossing gates, nodding to the man in the signal box, who had known her since she was a schoolgirl on a bicycle, hanging on to the fence while the trains passed. His answering smile and nod warmed her, and she set off towards home with more energy than she had shown on the station platform.

She was cold from sitting in an ill-heated carriage for so

long. The afternoon was dull, the sky overcast. As she went along, the few people she encountered said that it looked like snow, and she agreed with them. Before her the downs rose in their massive bulk, sharply defined; it was their most forbidding aspect, when they seemed to assert at once the strength of their permanence and their complete detachment from the transient affairs of men. Kay, who loved to wander on their slopes at all times of the year, felt rebuked for her self-absorption. As she walked, drawing the blood again to her toes and fingers, she determined to go straight out to the downs as soon as she had got rid of her luggage and greeted her parents. The strength that she needed lay in these great hills: there, if anywhere, she would be able to loosen the stranglehold of her obsession.

But her plan came to nothing. Mrs. Lawson had looked up the trains in a time-table, confirmed them by ringing up the stationmaster at Crimpfield, and even knew that Kay had arrived there.

"They told me you had come down on the three-ten," she said triumphantly, drawing Kay into the hall, and kissing her warmly. "I wondered if they might have altered the trains for Christmas, so I rang up just now, and I actually heard the three-ten going out again. Mr. Barker said he could see you through the window of his office crossing the line, so I put on a kettle at once and it ought to be just boiling. We can have tea straight away."

"You shouldn't have bothered," said Kay, trying to avoid being ungracious, but bitterly disappointed at the prospect of losing her walk. "Isn't it rather early for tea? I was thinking of staying out for a bit."

"Staying out?"

Mrs. Lawson, her welcoming manner thoroughly damped, looked at her daughter in surprise. Kay tried to laugh.

"I don't want to waste the fresh air," she explained, not

very tactfully. "I only have a week, and it gets dark terribly early at this time of the year."

She thought of June, so far away, and the long sunlit evenings of her holiday.

"It is nearly dark now," said Mrs. Lawson, proving the truth of her words by shutting the front door behind Kay and throwing the hall into a deep gloom. "You can't possibly want to stay out on such a miserable afternoon. It looks like snow," she added, repeating the universal forecast.

Kay gave in with a dispirited smile.

"It was seeing the downs as I came along from the station," she explained. "I always want to climb them the minute I get back. Can I help with the tea?"

"No, I'm a lady today," said Mrs. Lawson gaily, having won her point. "Mrs. Fielding is staying on till six. She will wash up the tea things and do the vegetables for dinner."

Kay was touched. All these arrangements—the daily's extra time, the big meal kept for the evening—all this was done for her, who thought so seldom of her home, whose parents had no place at all in her inner life. She dropped her suitcase on a settle beside the grandfather clock and put an arm round her mother's waist.

"I'm coming with you even if I'm not allowed to help," she said. "I haven't seen Mrs. Fielding in months. Do you still have to let her bring the child with her?"

"He has a cold at the moment, thank God. She lets him help me in the garden now, which is much better than having him sit all the morning on one of the kitchen chairs, tearing up old newspapers. He likes weeding the paths: he does it quite well."

Mrs. Fielding expressed herself pleased to see Kay, but thought she looked thin. She said the rest and the air would do her good, but she thought they would have snow. She

said she had made some scones for tea and was keeping them hot in the oven.

Kay was thankful she had not insisted upon her walk. It would be the last enormity to offend Mrs. Fielding, the best of Crimpfield's small force of daily helps, and this because she was the only one who now felt the pinch of circumstance, having to maintain herself and her small delicate boy on what she earned, together with her widow's pension. She was debarred by the boy's condition from taking a living-in post at a higher wage. Not that she favoured such a post, apart from the money. She preferred the variety of serving three ladies for a limited number of hours each week. She enjoyed contrasting their several households, and conveying their individual gossip to and fro between them and her own friends.

"The kettle has boiled," said Mrs. Fielding, interrupting her discourse on the weather and the effect it was having on her invalid son. "Shall I make tea now, m'm?"

"Would you?" said Mrs. Lawson. "I'll just take the tray in and come back for the teapot."

"Let me take the tray," said Kay, moving up to the table.

"You bring the scones."

Mrs. Fielding, rocking boiling water in the silver teapot between her hands, stood near the gas stove placidly watching this scene. She never offered to carry trays. It was no part of her work. She was there to clean and to do a bit of cooking alternate days. To carry trays would be the thin edge of the wedge. If they wanted that they must get a parlourmaid. Mrs. Fielding had been a cook-general in her youth. She had known the tyranny of bells and the indifference to what two hands could manage. She sometimes gave Mrs. Lawson little lectures on the past evils of general domestic service. But she offset these by her reliable cooking, and the amount of work she managed to put into four hours. The last betrayed her there. She could not conceal

that she had learned in her youth how to work hard and easily, without effort or boredom or resentment.

When she had put down the tray by the drawing-room fire, and greeted her father, who, at the clinking sound of china crossing the hall, appeared from his own room, Kay went back to the kitchen for the teapot and hot-water jug. Mrs. Fielding turned them with their handles towards her.

"You look as if you could do with a holiday, miss," she said, her shrewd eyes exploring Kay's face. "That nursing must be rare hard work."

"It is rather," admitted Kay.

"Always seeing sick faces all round you," went on Mrs. Fielding thoughtfully. "That's bad. Gets you down."

"How's Ronnie?"

Mrs. Fielding's expression did not change: her son's affliction was too familiar.

"A bit of a cold," she said. "Nothing to worry over, but he's best at home. Mrs. Fossit lets him go in to her while I'm out."

She poured a cup of tea for herself as she spoke, sitting down placidly with it at the kitchen table, in no hurry to bring Mrs. Fossit's responsibility to an end.

Kay settled into an armchair with a book after tea, but before long she found herself falling asleep. She had dreaded the freedom and relaxation of a holiday in case it should release the feelings she knew she had not stifled, but only with immense weariness controlled. It seemed that her fears were unnecessary. In the pleasant quiet and trivial conversation of her home she found herself truly at peace. No one, sick or healthy, made any demands upon her. Her novel was infinitely remote.

Christmas Eve came and went, and Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Kay received her accustomed number of presents, no more and no fewer than in former years. In her turn she presented her own gifts. All except one; the book

for Roger which she had bought early in October when she chanced upon it in a bookshop near Covent Garden. She had brought it to Crimpfield, uncertain whether to post it or not, and in the end had let it lie in a drawer where she had hidden it from curious eyes. She determined to leave it there when she went back to the hospital at the end of her week. She felt no pang as she arrived at this decision.

On the morning after Boxing Day Roger telephoned. Kay was at the bottom of the garden feeding the hens, directly after breakfast, when the call came through. Her mother, breathless from hurrying down the garden path, told her that someone was on the line from London.

"Not Sister Tutor?" cried Kay, beginning to run back to the house.

"I didn't wait to ask. The girl at the exchange said a call from London, so I came straight out, so as to save the three minutes."

But Kay had disappeared, and her mother's explanation was wasted on the garden air. She picked up the empty saucepan that had held the chicken's food and with a patient shrug took it back into the house with her.

Roger's voice, very slightly impatient, greeted Kay.

"How are you? You seem very difficult to get at. They couldn't find the number of your house for ages and then you weren't about."

"I was only down the garden feeding the hens."

"A horrid pastime. Or do you like hens?"

"I hate them. But I like eggs."

"Yes, That is the only justification for their existence, isn't it? How are you?"

"Quite well, thank you."

She heard her own blank polite voice with a slight shiver. Its tone appeared to have crossed the distance between them, because Roger laughed uneasily and seemed to hesitate.

"That's good. I have been meaning to ring you up for a long time, but getting you at the hospital is such a formidable business. Also I have been doing an extraordinary amount of work, for me, in and out of hours. I have a new Case, a former member of one of our clubs. The Army doesn't seem to have agreed with him. He is taking a lot of sorting out. I was wondering if you had a nice convenient train arriving at Crimpfield in the early afternoon?"

He had made no pause before this proposal. Kay's voice shook as she answered.

"A train? Do you mean you want to come down?"

"That was the idea."

"Today?"

"Or tomorrow. London is worse than usual just after a public holiday."

"You'll have to change at Lewes."

"Shall I mind that?"

She laughed naturally for the first time and heard his relieved response.

"I mean it's rather a long journey. And rather a slow one. You'll have to get the nine-thirty from Victoria. Can you make it?"

"I haven't shaved yet. I'm not really up, you see. Just wandering in a dressing gown. Mrs. Hedges has now brought in my breakfast. She looks very disapproving."

Kay heard Mrs. Hedges' fat laugh in the background. She began to feel dizzy with pleasure and excitement.

"Don't bother to shave."

"Will your parents approve of a black beard?"

"It won't be as bad as that. Only a slightly bluer jowl."

"I resent the implication of that remark. I will catch the nine-thirty. I will also shave. Where do I go when I reach Crimpfield?"

"I'll meet you at the station."

Kay put down the receiver and leaned against the wall .

beside the telephone table to steady herself. She did not know whether to laugh or cry. All her stiff conventional resistance to the idea of Roger, her all-or-nothing attitude to her love, had been tumbled down by his unrepentant cheerful assumption of mastery. She was too thankful for the mere sound of his voice to resent it.

"Who was that?" asked her mother, arriving in the hall and looking at her curiously.

"A friend of mine. He's coming down on the nine-thirty. Can he come to lunch?"

Mrs. Lawson stared. So Kay had a new friend. She had been wonderfully secretive about it, but that made the position more interesting.

"A hospital friend?" she asked.

"No. A friend of the Howards. I met him while I was with them. He does social work in London."

Another earnest young man, thought Mrs. Lawson. There would be trouble with her husband over having him to lunch, but fortunately there were the remains of the turkey. A fricassee, and she could mix in the rest of the sausage meat and the stuffing to make up the quantity. If only the milkman did not come too late and would give her an extra half-pint. She went on her way to the kitchen without asking Kay any more questions about her new friend.

But when she had finished discussing the fricassee with Mrs. Fielding and had opened some of her home-bottled plums to provide a fruit pie to follow it, she went in search of Kay's father.

"What sort of social work?" he asked suspiciously. As a retired Indian Civil servant he had a deeply ingrained distrust of good works, born of the importunities of Missionaries. He thought of all such people as fanatics, and was aware that social service acted upon them as a kind of fly-paper.

"She didn't say, but he is a friend of those Service friends of hers she went down to Devonshire to be with last summer. She met him there, she says. It must have been going on all these months. She was very het up when he 'phoned. I do hope he is coming down to propose to her."

"He damned well ought to be, inviting himself to lunch like this, two days after Christmas."

"It's a very good time to do so," replied Mrs. Lawson. "There is plenty of turkey left. You can't resent sharing that; you've enjoyed three meals of it already."

"I do resent it," said Mr. Lawson simply. "I resent anyone eating my miserable rations."

"The turkey wasn't rationed," said his wife. "It was practically black market, because Mr. Goacher reserved it for us on the farm in November. I'd never have got such a magnificent bird in the shops. I know for a fact that he had people at the farm every day for a fortnight before Christmas, offering him the earth for his turkeys."

"We shan't see turkey again for a year. I still resent giving it away to strangers. None of which gets us much further with Kay's young man," said Mr. Lawson, filling a pipe in preparation for his morning's round of duties in the garden.

"You'll see him at lunch," said Mrs. Lawson complacently. She already looked forward to welcoming a future son-in-law.

Roger Monkhouse, shaved and dressed in good, suitably worn, country clothes, surprised both Kay's parents, but while her mother was flattered by the charm of his attentive manner to her, her father, recognising the maturity of his outlook, was filled with curiosity about his alleged profession. A short talk alone with him beside the chilly wood fire in his own room while the women helped Mrs. Fielding to clear the table and wash up, did not enlighten him further, though it added to his respect for Roger's ability and high

standing among philanthropists. Several well-known names were mentioned half familiarly. Their owners had visited the youth clubs: Roger seemed to know them personally. He gave an impression of devoted aims lit by worldly wisdom; he was certainly no fanatic. Mr. Lawson was frankly puzzled to know what such a man could find in his dreamy colourless daughter, with her peculiar gift for nonsensical romantic invention.

Roger did not help him. If his intentions were amorous, he could not have been more discreet. All Mr. Lawson's attempts to bring Kay into the conversation were neatly checked. And when she and Mrs. Lawson entered the room together to say that coffee was waiting in the drawing room, Roger seemed to have more attention for his hostess than for Kay. But five minutes later the two of them were walking out of the house together, while the parents stared at one another over their still unemptied cups.

"How did he manage that?" said Mr. Lawson admiringly, twisting himself in his chair to watch Kay and Roger pass through the garden gate.

"He's delightful," said Mrs. Lawson, with enthusiasm. "I do hope . . ."

There was no need to finish her sentence. Mr. Lawson stirred his cooling coffee reflectively.

Twenty yards down the road Kay turned into the footpath that wound back towards the downs past her own garden hedge. She did so mechanically, hardly aware of her direction; it was the usual start for any walk on the hills.

They climbed upwards slowly, often pausing to look back, first at the house, then at the whole village, finally from the summit of the down at the great weald stretching north to the Ashdown Forest. There was a leaden look upon the whole scene, a biting chill in the air, but no wind. The low sky, darker at the horizon than the turf of the hill, held the yellow tinge of expected snow.

"The wireless said we were for it tonight in southern England," said Roger, staring upwards with distaste.

"I wish it would hurry up and come," said Kay. "I'm so tired of everyone expecting it."

"You are lucky to have a home in the country," said Roger.

"Have you never lived in the country?"

"Not since I was a boy. My schools were in the country, but you can't count that. My old mother lives with a still older aunt in Bath. I don't stay there very often. My father was killed in the last year of the First War; he was a regular."

It was the first time he had talked to her about his family. Kay tried to encourage him to tell her more, but he seemed to have nothing much to tell, or nothing in which he was sufficiently interested to describe fully. He had a married sister in Oxford, whom he visited occasionally, and a younger brother in the Navy. Kay was given the impression that he was very much the head of his family, managing his mother's affairs, advising the others, standing god-father to his nephews and nieces; but intimate with none, and feeling the merest tolerant affection for them.

"I think you are very lucky to live in the country," said Roger again, after a pause long enough to bury the subject of his family without fear of resurrection. "And I don't believe I should be here now if it wasn't for that."

"Why?"

He laughed.

"I went to a rather mad Boxing Day party last night which went on very late. I felt very far from well this morning and took a great loathing for London, as I often do after late parties. Then I remembered that you lived in the country. I was meaning to ring up to ask how the novel was getting on, so I thought it would be nice to combine the two things. I was afraid you might be going out for the day yourself, though."

"I never go out anywhere here," said Kay roughly. "There isn't anyone to go out with."

"You can't tell me you have no friends," cried Roger incredulously.

"Very few. The four people I knew well here have all gone; they are all married. The others are very slight acquaintances. I go out to tea sometimes when Mummy visits her own friends, but I usually try to avoid that. My real friends are in London, except for the Howards at Uxbridge. But there aren't more than half a dozen that count."

"There are never more than five or six that count," said Roger. "Often far fewer than that. I have not many friends myself, but hundreds of acquaintances."

"You don't seem to need friends," said Kay bitterly. "I do."

She walked on in silence for a time and Roger did not try to make her talk. He found she was unwilling to discuss her novel and gathered that she had done very little work on it since their last unfortunate evening together. He realised how much he had contributed to this failure, but he could not see how to mend it. He began to regret his impulse of the morning. Then it had seemed to him that five weeks must have restored Kay to her normal sanity, and that their friendship might continue unchecked. But evidently five weeks were not enough. The old saying about absence jingled unpleasantly in his mind. Perhaps, he thought cynically, it would have been wiser to make love to the girl, and disillusion her that way. Only there was the risk that she might not be disillusioned. And in any case, his better feelings suggested, he thought too much of her to treat her so dishonestly. Above all, he was too old for that sort of thing now. Or liked to say so, and perhaps to think so. On cold dark unpleasant days like this one, at any rate.

"I think you have been overworking," he said calmly,

when Kay's set profile began to distress him. "I know I have. There has been a move to affiliate some independent clubs to our group. The padre who started one of them some years ago was very taken with our self-governing system. It has meant a lot of extra committees and arguing over the same ground again and again. But you can't persuade people to do things unless they have argued themselves out first. Very tiring, though, if you happen to be chairman of the meeting. On top of that I have an incipient kleptomaniac on my hands."

"Your new case?" asked Kay, remembering his allusion to it on the telephone.

"Yes. He is a boy who used to come to the club where I was warden. He is only twenty-three now. He was called up at eighteen and fought for a year. He found the milder sort of looting very congenial, and was never found out. He says he can't control the impulse now. But he has been found out recently at the place where he lives: they have refused to let him go on staying in their house, but they don't want to prosecute. He came to me the night they slung him out."

"Did he take anything of yours?" asked Kay.

Roger looked at her thoughtfully.

"Not that night. Not so far. Do you think he will?"

"I don't see why not."

"At present," said Roger stiffly, "he is inclined to be grateful. I let him stay for a day or two and pushed him into a job. He had been living on his gratuity and looking round."

"Has he given up stealing?"

"Apparently. For the present, at any rate. I know why he stole from the people he was with. He told me. He told me a lot about himself."

Roger paused to give weight to what he had just said, then added, "I think I ought to set up as a psychoanalyst."

"You would need a proper training," replied Kay, determined not to flatter him.

They both welcomed the bright fire and trivial conversation that met them on their return. Kay made the tea while her parents entertained the guest. Afterwards Mrs. Lawson insisted upon clearing away by herself and Mr. Lawson, with ponderous tact, went in search of another pipe and apparently never found it.

"Vic Stevens is being analysed," said Roger, breaking an awkward silence with a return to his psychological problems.

"Oh. Is it doing him any good?"

"I think it will. He has stopped hearing voices. So I suppose he has missed a complete breakdown."

"He seemed such a normal boy in the summer," said Kay regretfully. It was not fair that Victor should be so punished for his exuberance.

"You thought so?" said Roger eagerly. "So did I. Artistic temperament, of course. It plays the devil, especially with adolescents. But I am convinced he is essentially normal. I had him along for a final talk to tell him so."

"You had him along?"

Kay was suddenly filled with horror. The boy, who had been in great danger, was now in competent hands, or so she hoped. In helping him to that end Roger had done well; he had fulfilled her original idea of him. But having done this, having done all that was in his power to do, he should have effaced himself, for the boy's sake and for his own. This last meeting was an act of wanton cruelty, and so, she decided with sudden insight, was his coming to her that day.

"It was cruel, I suppose," said Roger, watching her, and as usual reading her thoughts, "but one has to be cruel sometimes."

She saw that he quite openly enjoyed his cruelty, not

troubling, as he usually did when he observed her distress, to hide his pleasure and lead her thoughts elsewhere. She shrank from him.

"Vic wouldn't think so," she said, including herself with the boy in her own mind. "If you can't give, you should keep away."

"You don't suggest I should give Vic what he wants, do you?" Roger asked, with a faint cold smile.

"Of course not."

She could not look at him. He misunderstood her wilfully, indecently, playing with her as he had played with Victor Stevens. She tried to whip up resentment to defeat her misery, but her anger tripped her tongue, and she found herself mumbling obscurities, until her voice died away and she sat gazing stonily into the fire.

"He hasn't let you down," said Roger in a changed voice, gentle, sad, grieving for the sins of the world. "He can't help his temperament. No one can."

"I know that."

Her generosity was equal to his appeal. She was touched by his use of the third person, a child's trick of dissociating himself from his misdeeds. And her simplicity of spirit granted him his absolute right to choose where he loved.

"I know," she repeated. "I do know."

For a moment Roger regretted his own nature, seeing himself in the flame of Kay's anguish. But the vision was too blinding; he turned from it instantly. Mrs. Lawson's entry into the room at once restored him. He stood up.

"I'm afraid I must be getting along now," he said. "Thank you for a very charming day."

"I'm sorry you have to go," said Mrs. Lawson.

"Trains wait for no man," said Roger, "especially at small country stations."

"Can you find your way there in the dark?"

"I'm not sure that I can."

He looked at Kay, who said in a low voice, gripping the mantelpiece hard, "I'll come with you."

They put on their coats and walked out into a black night of extreme cold. They could see nothing in front of them, and walking uncertainly bumped together several times, until Roger took hold of Kay's arm in his usual manner. But she shrank away from his touch, so that he dropped his hand. Presently they collided again in the dark.

"You had much better take my arm," said Roger kindly.

Kay did so and for the rest of their hideous walk they went linked together.

Roger talked about the art of writing. He talked bitterly, cynically, hopelessly, of achievement in art, its limitations, its emptiness, the falseness of popularity, the hollow nature of fame. He gave a great many examples to illustrate his argument. Kay felt that she was shut with him in a dark cell of despair, waiting for a final salutary destruction. She made frantic efforts to release them both.

"I know I could write if I was happy," she said more than once. "I didn't think after Dennis was killed I could ever be so utterly unhappy again. I thought the worst had happened. I thought anything that came next would be—a sort of compensation."

"There are no rewards for virtue," Roger told her.

His answer was no answer at all. It was merely a repetition of his perversity. She could not fight it, or him. She was thankful when they reached the station and more so when the train proved to be punctual.

"Thank you for a delightful day," said Roger politely, leaning from the carriage window. Kay looked at him incredulously; he had said it before to her mother, with some justification. To repeat it to her was either an insult, or a very heartless joke. But his face was calm: evidently neither explanation held. His words had been purely

mechanical. His thoughts had already left Crimpfield and herself far behind.

On her way home she heard herself whimpering aloud, like a patient coming round from an anaesthetic.

During the last three days of her holiday Kay wrote a long incoherent letter to Roger, explaining to him her general state of mind. She made no demands; there were no reproaches. But it was an appeal, for all that.

"... I can go with you at your side as an equal, or I can go away from you. But I cannot trail along in chains behind you, fed with scraps when you happen to remember my existence..."

There were many such passages of extravagant grief, and Roger found them very painful to read. He wrote back a full account of his own character as he conceived it. He also explained that while realising she was very much in love with him, he was not in love with her. He ended with the words, "it is as before, or not at all."

He was fairly confident that she would adopt the former course. He had no wish to hurt her; he thought of her always with affection. But he was convinced that he could do much to promote the success of her novel, and that the suffering to her which a continued association with him would entail, was both justified and relatively unimportant.

CHAPTER XI

AS A RESULT of this, her second and more serious, because more directly humiliating failure, Kay's self-confidence was utterly destroyed, and with it her faith in her novel. Her former pain had stimulated her, but this was too much. She felt crushed and hopeless.

She, no less than her parents, had thought that the purpose of Roger's visit was to further his love, if not to declare it. She experienced now the added trial of meeting their curiosity, of turning it away without betraying herself, and finally of answering their not unnatural criticism of Roger's behaviour. They quite rightly could not believe that such eccentricities were part of a slight or casual relationship. He must have known their daughter pretty well to invite himself to her home at such short notice. Mr. Lawson wrote him off as a bounder. Mrs. Lawson, looking wistfully at Kay, wondered how far the affair had gone, and whether she had witnessed the end of a liaison rather than the beginning of a marriage. Both their views were apparent to Kay, and hurt her equally. So discouraged was she by their doubts added to her own, so bruised by the rooting up of her love, that her creative power left her; she could no longer see the faces of her characters, nor remember the story she had devised for them. She put her manuscript away at the bottom of a drawer full of summer clothes where it would lie undisturbed for several months. She had an impulse to destroy it, but her saner artistic judgment prevented this. It had been a work of promise, and of much importance to her. It might be so again. At

any rate it was unfinished, and she could not tear up an uncompleted failure.

As for her public behaviour, the loss of everything that she had leaned upon and prized for so many months had its inevitable result. Her work was in no way improved by her holiday, and her temper was more uncertain than before.

Thanks to Dr. Mathers' influence she had been sent back to Cecilia Ward, where Sister Blakeley, warned in advance, was keeping her under a strict eye. For a day or two she appeared to take a more lively interest in the routine of the ward than she had done of late in the Children's Block. One or two of the patients she had known were still there. They greeted her as an old and loved friend, and she responded to their affection and to their renewed demands upon her. Unfortunately her heightened feelings led her to betray the extent of the conflict that still tormented her unceasingly.

During her absence from Cecilia, Gwen Oldham, her former fellow-probationer, had been without help except for that given by part-time workers, who, though trained, were either over-age, or married, or for some other reason able or willing to give only a limited number of hours a week to nursing. The wards took it in turn to run short of staff. The supply of full-time probationers was too small to provide a substitute for Kay, but on the whole Gwen had enjoyed the extra work because it had added so much to her experience. She was a conscientious girl, devoted to her profession, and quite seriously looking forward to a career of permanent usefulness. In the unfortunate episode of the broken crockery, the management committee had finally apportioned the blame to Eva, the ward maid, and since then, influenced perhaps by the official verdict, Sister had been more approachable and more willing to trust Gwen. The ward maid's action in giving notice at once had

certainly confirmed her guilt in Sister's eyes. So Gwen Oldham found herself restored to Sister Blakeley's confidence, without even Kay to stand between her and the responsibility she sought.

But her satisfaction was short-lived. Kay had been sent back to Cecilia Ward much sooner than she expected. In the ordinary way of routine she would not have returned there at all, but would have moved from the Children's Block to a surgical unit or special department. As it was, the hand of Dr. Mathers was apparent in this arrangement. Gwen resented his interest in Kay, resented the possibility that Sister might again begin to find her more fruitful of ideas than Gwen herself, resented above all her assumption of authority with the patients who had been there long enough to remember her. But she was a good-natured girl, and her irritation might never have found expression if the storm in Kay's heart had not broken loose.

The occasion of this was trivial enough. Every morning one of the physiotherapists came to Cecilia Ward to encourage the patients to use their neglected muscles, and to give special exercises and massage to those who needed them. One of the chronic cases, now reasonably patched up, was being prepared for her discharge. But her long illness had frightened her; she was afraid to make any efforts, and very much afraid of a return to her normal household duties at home. She much preferred to go on thinking of herself as an invalid, and had already prepared her relations to receive her as such. Sister Blakeley had done what she could to alter her outlook, and the physiotherapist was cooperating to that end. Gwen Oldham had also made it her business to get this patient up as much as possible, and to see that she spent some time on her feet every day.

But Kay's return had given the hypochondriac her chance. She had fastened upon her as the one sympathetic

being in a world of stony hearts. Kay, who had seen her in the earlier stages of her illness, was quite prepared to believe in her continued frailty. Suffering herself, her heart went out to suffering in others. She was flattered and comforted by the appeal to her. She took Mrs. Austen's part.

"You do realise, I suppose, that she is going home next Wednesday," said Gwen Oldham coldly, looking round the screens as Kay helped the panting Mrs. Austen to undress.

Tears filled the patient's eyes. Seeing them, Kay felt a savage rage.

"Does Dr. Mathers know what she is *really* like by the end of a day?" she asked fiercely.

"Of course he does."

"Has he ever seen her in the evening?"

"I really couldn't say."

"Then what right have you . . ."

Gwen supported herself with one hand on the top of the screen. She did not look at Kay.

"Miss Phillips wants you to go to her department in the morning, Mrs. Austen," she said. "You've got beyond the ward exercises, she says. If you have a short course of rehabilitation before you leave, you won't feel the shopping basket and the queues so much. Sister says you've been splendid the last day or two."

Mrs. Austen lay down flat on her bed and burst into tears. Kay turned on Gwen furiously.

"Even if you haven't a decent feeling left you could be reasonably tactful. Do you think she would have needed me to get her to bed if she wasn't in pain? I shall speak to Sister."

"She happens to be off duty," drawled Gwen, still supporting herself on the screen.

"Staff Nurse, then."

Mrs. Austen had stopped crying: she found the growing quarrel more interesting.

"Come outside," said Gwen Oldham, realising suddenly the extent of Kay's anger. "You can't talk like that in the ward."

Kay was seized by a strong impulse to slap her colleague's face and pull her starched cap from her head. The strength of her feeling horrified her so much that she followed Nurse Oldham out of the ward in complete silence. In the ward kitchen they faced one another. Gwen's mood had changed: she wanted to get on with her work, and besides, she was inclined to be frightened by the wild look in Kay's eyes.

"Snap out of it, there's a dear," she said with an uneasy laugh, trying to make her voice echo the kindly common sense in her heart. After all, she and Kay had rubbed along all right in the old days last autumn, in spite of the obvious differences between them.

"You smug little bitch!" said Kay, trembling. She was beside herself with rage. "I suppose you think if you copy Sister's manner, you'll step into her shoes when you've finished your training. You couldn't be more mistaken. Sister may seem hard, but she knows her stuff. You're callous without even being efficient. If you don't stop nagging Mrs. Austen she'll have a relapse. She isn't far off it now. Dr. Mathers ought to be told."

"Sentimental tripe!" said Gwen rudely.

The sneer at her ambitions had touched her. More than once she had reflected upon Sister Blakeley's age, and upon Staff Nurse's declared plans to remove herself to a job in the country.

Kay began to feel dizzy and rather sick. She leaned against the ward kitchen sink, longing to bring this unpleasant scene to an end, but not knowing how to do so. Gwen looked at her contemptuously for a second or two, and then, not being a revengeful girl, went briskly back to the ward. She determined to suppress the whole matter.

But in this she failed. Public quarrels are not easily

ut, and the spectators do not readily give up the discussing them. Several patients besides Mrs. ~~_____~~ had been interested in the sudden anger between the two nurses, and had gone over and over the affair amongst themselves and later with Staff Nurse, when she came to see why Mrs. Austen was still screened. Staff Nurse interviewed her probationers in turn, made no headway with either of them, and reported the matter next day to Sister. Sister administered impartial reproof and consulted Dr. Mathers, since the affair involved Kay. He sent for her again, and finding her as stubborn and unconfiding as before, warned her of the probable result of her conduct if she refused to take her own health seriously.

So, in just a week from the arrival of Roger's scarifying letter, Kay found herself driven to a further extremity. Either she must accept a complete break with him, and secure it, killing her now full-grown love, risking the sort of breakdown in health that would lead to her dismissal from the hospital, or she must accept his terms for a renewal of their friendship. Each of these courses, on a first examination, seemed to promise an equal misery; the one a life of complete emptiness, the other one of unbearable, hopeless strain. But she remembered the former effects of conflict on her writing, and she counted up the gain to her novel that Roger's help and criticism had already provided, forgetting her own former estimate of its worth. She was very confused, very much weakened by pain and sleeplessness. Her need of Roger, and of all that he stood for, flooded every level of her being. It would not be denied; she was quite helpless. She made her submission in a brief letter that explained nothing except her willingness to bring him some further chapters of her work. She even succeeded in persuading herself that a platonic friendship with a man of Roger's transcending powers was not only possible but to be preferred. Love from such a man would burn her up.

She shrank now from a closer relationship, even though she still sought it. To his previous hold upon her imagination and senses, there was added now the supreme attraction of fear.

Her letter of reconciliation touched Roger deeply. It woke in him memories he had thought buried for ever. In similar fashion the woman he had loved, after deserting him to marry his rival, had come back at last, acknowledging his supremacy. And he had welcomed her, and celebrated his triumph for several years, only to find in the end that the relationship was barren. She could never quite be parted from her children and her husband. He could never possess her wholly, and at last he had become bored by the failure of his efforts, and finally discouraged by the knowledge that, should he succeed, he would find himself as shackled by a happy marriage as he had formerly been by an unhappy love. His great and final bitterness had lain, not so much in the fact of parting, as in the way it had been brought about. For the final action had been her husband's, performed almost casually, at any rate without notice or preparation. He had never known if the man were ignorant or merely indifferent. But he himself had not been allowed to administer the death-stroke; his pride had suffered; it was long before he had allowed himself to look back on those three entrancing years.

Kay's devotion, which obviously went deeper than the frank admiration he excited in most of the women he met, began, from the day her letter arrived, to assume a new significance. It was not that he felt any responsibility for her state. He had given her friendship, and sometimes advice, but never love. His letter to her had explained the impossibility of such a development. That part of his life was over, or such was his intention. He hoped that she now understood his nature, and was not merely trying to approach him by another road. If so, she would fail. He

was convinced that it was a question of necessity, of his own integrity: his life was such that it could not be shared.

With all this in his mind, Roger asked Mrs. Hedges to prepare tea for Kay and himself the following day.

"It's a long time since Miss Lawson was here last," said Mrs. Hedges, curious to know the reason for her absence from the flat.

"Is it?" asked Roger mildly. "Yes, I suppose it is. She works very hard, and she does too much. She tries to write as well as train for a nurse. I think the two things must clash."

"Tomorrow, did you say, sir?" went on Mrs. Hedges.

Without waiting for an answer she delivered her reasons for asking.

"I thought you said Mr. Foley was coming in with a new batch of those old prints he's forever collecting. Where he picks them up, the dirty old things, is beyond me. I'm glad he doesn't bring his finds in here but the once. I'd be dusting all day and never done. You told me to have dinner in the evening for him."

"Bother! I shall have to put him off."

"Won't Miss Lawson be gone before dinner-time, if she's coming early?"

"Probably not, Mrs. Hedges. Most probably not. As you say, it is a long time since she was here."

"Do you want me to have dinner for you and Miss Lawson, then?"

"I expect we shall go out."

Mrs. Hedges looked severe, but said nothing. She continued however, to flick dust off Roger's desk.

"Do you think I ought to have her to dinner here?" Roger asked, curious to know his housekeeper's views. "Do you think she would like that?"

"It isn't for me to know what she'd like or what she wouldn't," said Mrs. Hedges severely. "I'd have thought myself you could have killed the two birds with one stone

and had Mr. Foley and Miss Lawson both together. Which reminds me," she went on, "I saw some nice plump guinea fowl at the butcher's yesterday. Quite reasonable, they were. Too much for one or even two, but very suitable for three."

"Are you trying to get up a real dinner-party for me?"

"I just thought you might like to entertain your friends together, sir."

They looked at one another, each considering how far to go towards a common understanding. Roger's calculations, as usual, outstripped in speed and accuracy his protagonist's.

"I will certainly do so sometime, but not tomorrow," he said. "Miss Lawson is bringing me some of her work, and we shall have to discuss it. I did tell you she is a novelist, as well as a hospital nurse, didn't I?"

Mrs. Hedges sniffed without speaking. Obscurely she blamed the defeat of her project upon Kay.

"Besides," said Roger, with the deliberate weight he always found effective in making any fairly preposterous statement, "Miss Lawson has not been very well lately. She works much too hard and drives herself too fiercely."

"Does she?" replied Mrs. Hedges, in a surprised tone. "She never looked that sort to me, I must say. A quiet sensible young lady, I should have thought."

Again they looked at one another. Mrs. Hedges' words might be a warning, or they might not, Roger decided. He fell back upon cliché.

"Looks are deceptive," he said.

Mrs. Hedges compressed her lips, but made no answer. Miss Lawson was not her business, and by the way it was turning out, not particularly Mr. Monkhouse's business either, it seemed. She was not sorry, being very comfortable in her present post, and having no wish to be supplanted.

"She'll just be here to tea, then? Is that right, sir?"

"Quite right. Thank you."

Roger was smiling, his usual charming affectionate smile, and Mrs. Hedges could not withstand it. She smiled back, already reckoning up the available fat in the larder, and calculating how many eggs she could spare for a sweet sandwich.

CHAPTER XII

IN SPITE OF the trouble Roger had taken with Mrs. Hedges to arrange for Kay's reception at the flat, he was not there in person to greet her when she arrived. For over a day she had rehearsed an infinity of reconciliation scenes, with herself cast as a very magnanimous heroine, and Roger alternating between strong silent remorse and a passionate conversion. Though he had said he did not love her, hearts could be won, and there was no real reason, she tried to persuade herself, why a woman should not win a reluctant man, perhaps less becomingly, but with as much success, as men were accustomed to have with unwilling girls. She did not convince herself of this, but her day-dreams continued unabated.

It was disconcerting, therefore, to be shown into an empty room by the affable Mrs. Hedges, who treated her as if she had not noticed her long absence, or thought little of it.

"He'll be a bit late, I expect," said Mrs. Hedges. "He's gone down to the East End to a committee meeting or conference, I wouldn't know the difference. He did tell me, but my mind's a sieve, what with points and coupons and these forms. Do you get a lot of extra paper work in the hospital, Miss?"

"I don't personally," answered Kay. "But there is a lot, I know."

"Well, make yourself at home," said Mrs. Hedges, putting a very small fresh log on the fire, where it began to hiss rather miserably and give off a little cloud of steam.

Kay put down a parcel she had brought, pulled off her

gloves and unfastened her coat, which, as the room was cold, she kept on. She looked at herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. Her head scarf gave her face a pinched hard look. She took off the scarf, combed out her hair and patted it into place, fastening it with combs. It fell into natural pleasant lines; she turned away reassured.

But she still felt restless and uneasy. By his absence Roger had taken the easy, the obvious way to assert his advantage. It was as if he had felt it necessary to remind her of his continued indifference. Such a gesture, made at such a time, was almost an insult, and if Kay had been capable of petty resentment she would have left the flat at once. But it was not in her nature to do so. She went to the window, stared for a time at the black branches of the plane trees, then turned to look back into the room.

Instantly her mind tossed her a word. *Meretricious*. She found she was not absolutely sure of its meaning. False, that was what it meant. Or did it? She looked about her for a dictionary. It had become important to her to discover what the word was stated to mean. In her own mind, she decided, it meant an elaborate artificial showiness, a false attraction, and she had applied it suddenly to this room and to everything in it much as the word "mountebank," at their very first meeting, had been applied to Roger. She had repudiated that word almost at once, and had forgotten it until now. But with "*meretricious*" dinning in her ears at the same time, brassy and bitter and slightly ridiculous, she could not dismiss either. She went from bookshelf to desk, lifted a pile of books on a table, discovered some more on the seat of an armchair. But there was no dictionary among them. Finally she thought of Mrs. Hedges, and of an easy approach to her. Taking up her parcel, she went out of the room into the little hall. One of the doors was slightly ajar, and behind it a presence moved. She stepped forward.

"I wonder if I could have a fresh bit of brown paper to do up this book in?" she asked humbly. "It has got like this through lying in a drawer at home for some time."

Mrs. Hedges, with hands greasy from making sandwiches, nodded towards the kitchen dresser.

"Put it down, miss, and I'll find something for you."

"Thank you," said Kay. "I'm a fearful nuisance, I'm afraid, but I also wanted to know where Mr. Monkhouse keeps his dictionary."

"I can't say I've ever noticed one," Mrs. Hedges answered, clearly trying to visualise a dictionary and not succeeding. "What sort of a dictionary, miss?"

"I don't know," answered Kay. "Probably just the Oxford. Doesn't he ever do cross-words?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"It ought to be on the bookshelf, if he has one," said Kay doubtfully.

"You've looked, have you, miss? In the drawing room, I mean? He has a lot of books in his bedroom, too. Have you looked there?"

"Of course not."

Kay spoke stiffly, and Mrs. Hedges, who was impatient of this interruption, stared at her with a shade of impertinence.

"I don't see why you shouldn't. There's no mystery about it."

Wiping her hands, she moved across the hall, flung open one of the other doors, and bustled in, beckoning to Kay to follow her.

"All his friends keep asking about books," she said complacently, "on account of he has so many. He's always lending them, and they're always lending him. And none of them seem to know who's got what. Like a lot of school-boys the way they behave in that room at times."

"Which friends are those?" asked Kay.

"Haven't you met them? The ones he works with at the clubs, and then there's two from the old days when he was on the stage. You know he used to be in the theatrical world, don't you? That's a photo of him as Romeo. Lovely, isn't he? He had the looks for it then—still has, in a way."

"Are you sure it isn't Hamlet?" asked Kay, taking the picture in her hands. She could not trust herself to answer the latter part of Mrs. Hedges' speech.

"Yes, Hamlet. That's it," said Mrs. Hedges, who was searching vaguely along the shelves of a large bookcase. "I always get the names mixed up."

"Hamlet, Prince of Darkness," said Kay, lost in the beauty of Roger's young face. Neither she nor Mrs. Hedges noticed her mistake.

"Well, it does seem funny now you mention it, him not having a dictionary," said the housekeeper absentmindedly, pulling out drawers in a wardrobe and pushing them in again. "Would this be it, miss?"

She handed a volume to Kay and was disappointed to see the visitor smile and then frown.

"I'm afraid it's a Larousse," she said. "A French one, all in French, not even French-English."

"Then I can't suggest where you'd find one," said Mrs. Hedges. "He should be in any minute, then you can ask him. Or there's just this cupboard: he keeps books in here too."

Stooping over Mrs. Hedges' shoulder, Kay looked into a small cupboard at the bottom of the wardrobe, intended originally for boots and shoes. In a neat row stood six volumes of the memoirs of Casanova, in translation, bound elaborately in white and gold. But no dictionary.

"It doesn't matter," said Kay. She found she was still holding the photograph. "I can, as you say, ask him presently. He probably knows the meaning of the word I want without looking it up."

She put the photograph back in its place with careful fingers. Perhaps he had been playing Romeo, after all. He was too young then for Hamlet. Actors did not play the Prince until they were mature, experienced, often middle-aged. He should play it as he was now, with his beauty hardly impaired, merely the lines cut deep in those places where the smooth flesh of his young face had only suggested the shape of the bones lying beneath.

"Hamlet, Prince of Darkness," she murmured again to herself crossing the hall. "Prince of . . ."

She recognised her error with a cold laugh. Denmark . . . dark . . . mark . . . dark . . . den. What jingles the mind played upon.

The sitting room when she regained it looked as it always did, a pleasant place, furnished pleasantly; a comfortable room, with a kind of masculine elegance about it. Whatever the word "meretricious" really meant, Kay thought, it could not be applied to this room. Perhaps she had intended it for Roger himself. Quite suddenly she wondered if she would be able to bear the change in him. The photograph she had been looking at was the Roger she had fallen in love with. She saw that quite clearly. How would the living mature Roger appear to her now? "Mountebank", she remembered again. Her very first coherent description of him, thrown up in her face by the unconscious tumult of her mind on the sunny hotel lawn last summer. "Meretricious mountebank." Horrible! A pompous, essentially meaningless epithet. She added another log to the fire and sat down to wait, clasping her hands in her lap and staring at the flames.

Roger was half an hour late. He came into the room on the heels of Mrs. Hedges, who carried the teapot and hot-water jug to the already waiting tray. He squatted on his heels near the fire to warm his cold hands, exclaiming, without any form of greeting, "What a wonderful fire you've

made! Do pour out, won't you? My hands are so cold I should be sure to break something."

It was all said gaily, while Mrs. Hedges was still in the room; said in the most matter-of-fact and friendly way. When the housekeeper had gone he took his cup in silence and put it down on the mantelpiece, standing up now quite close to the fire, and still warming his hands. He did not look at her.

"Have you got a dictionary?" Kay asked. She had meant to give up her quest, but searching in vain for something to say to break the unbearable silence between them, her mind had gone back to her recent need.

"Yes, here. I always carry a pocket one, because the boys are continually asking the meaning of words and I don't consider myself an authority. What do you say you want to know?"

"Let me have it. I'll look it up."

"You get on with your tea. You must be starving. What do you want to know?"

"The meaning of 'meretricious'."

"Come again."

"Meretricious."

"An ugly word," said Roger slowly, flipping over the pages of his little dictionary. "Ugly, thin, scratchy word. What do you want with it?"

"I think I want it for my book."

"Ah!" His voice held a note of great satisfaction. "How is it going?"

"You sound relieved."

"I am. I was afraid you might have stopped writing."

"Why?"

He felt her hostility and decided to avoid it.

"Here you are! 'Of, befitting, a harlot. Of ornament, literary style etc., showily attractive.' That do?"

"I was about right," said Kay sombrely. "Only I

didn't know it applied to harlots. But that fits, too."

It applied to herself in more ways than one, she decided. She wished she had stayed away. She was not comfortable with Roger now. Too much had happened between them without their meeting. She had been so intimate with him on paper, in her letters, and in her novel that was written for him, that his physical presence filled her with a sort of embarrassment; the kind of confusion, she thought, a bride may feel, sitting down to breakfast with her husband for the first time. And for herself the confusion was not going to be dispelled by faith and trust and love. These were dead; all the foundations of her passion had withered. There was only embarrassment and a dimming physical attraction, and she saw clearly that this would fade and wither too. She asked herself why she stayed there, talking mechanically about her novel, and plucking at her dying love to see if she could make it squirm a little.

Mrs. Hedges came in, performed her usual tasks, and withdrew. As she went she spoke over her shoulder to Kay.

"You won't forget your parcel, miss, will you? I've wrapped it in a bit of fresh paper for you, like you asked me."

"Oh, that!" Kay jumped up, smiling. "Thank you so much for reminding me. I'll come and fetch it at once."

While she was out of the room, Roger transferred himself to a low stool near the fire. He sat astride it, clasping his hands round one knee. Kay came back and stood looking down at him.

"It's your Christmas present," she said. "I didn't send it at Christmas—or afterwards. I found it in a drawer at home when I was there last Sunday. I thought you might like to have it." As he said nothing she added with a self-conscious laugh, "Better late than never."

Roger was appreciably moved. He was often loved, and as often hated, but seldom forgiven, and he found the sensa-

tion unexpectedly sweet. He took the parcel from her hand, looking up into her face with candid admiration.

"You have a most delightful nature," he said. "I am perfectly aware that I don't deserve this."

"I didn't think of it that way."

"I know you didn't. That is what I value so much. Most women would have turned it into a super-heated coal."

She turned away with tears in her eyes. He had riven apart the ocean-bed of her own emotions, but his lay beneath a wall of impregnable rock. She had never seen more than the light ripples on a shallow pool scooped in the surface of the rock. Today, in spite of the circumstances of their reunion, even such ripples as there were, passed swiftly. As she watched him through her tears, sitting back in a deep armchair hiding her face from him with one hand, she saw the flat surface restored to the rock-pool. He was talking, she realised, about Vic Stevens.

"... in repertory. He couldn't have done anything better. Plenty of hard work and experience. A few years of that will show him if he really has talent."

"If he has! But I thought you were sure of it. He was astonishingly good last summer."

"He was, compared with amateurs of no talent at all."

"Why aren't you sure now?"

"I have no means of knowing. He has left London."

"Oh, I see. But that is a good thing, isn't it?"

"Excellent, I should think."

She was still puzzled by his attitude, but he was speaking again, this time about someone else.

"I told you I had a new case, didn't I?"

"The boy who came back from the Army?"

"The kleptomaniac, yes. I'm having a devil of a time with him. He turns up three or four times a week. He seems to think I help him to keep his hands off the petty cash. I told you I found him a new job, didn't I?"

"Yes. I think you did."

"I must be rather good at psycho-analysing my friends," said Roger, with an apologetic smile. "I don't really approve of myself doing it, because I'm not trained. But if it works, and they say it does, it is rather difficult to refuse them. Besides, it comes a great deal less expensive than sending them to these Harley Street people."

"Did *you* pay for Vic Stevens?" asked Kay, struck by a new aspect of his activities.

"As a matter of fact, I did. The mother hadn't got it, and the uncle wouldn't play. But Vic didn't like the arrangement, I'm afraid. He's an independent little beggar. He declared himself cured and went off into this repertory company."

"To save your purse?"

"I don't know what it was to save," said Roger with a laugh. "Not the professional analyst's face, I rather fear. He was a bit sour. They reckon on having people attend for at least a year. Which looks hopeful for me and the klepto, doesn't it? I shall probably be shorn of all my personal knick-knacks in a week or so. He has had an ivory paper-knife already, only I made him give it back before he sold it. And two cuff-links. He cashed in on those."

"It might come cheaper in the long run to send him to the analyst," said Kay.

"I don't think he would be worth it, when he was finished," answered Roger. "A rather dull young man, though tenacious. I shall just have to throw him off when he gets unbearable, I think. I have had a good deal of experience of hard cases. They always respond at first to kindness, because their behaviour has so far brought them nothing but punishments. You think you are doing fine. Then comes the inevitable moment when habit or heredity or both brings their anti-social acts your way. You have to choose whether to put up with it and try again, or whether

to kick them out, or hand them on to someone better trained to cope with them. But I never look for much success. You can't change people. You can help them up to a point, perhaps inspire them to make efforts, but they always go back to their own particular vices."

He was staring into the fire, with a dark brooding expression that boded ill for the afflicted young man. Kay found herself remembering the photograph again. This was the expression on the young face she had claimed for Hamlet rather than Romeo. Hamlet, Prince of Darkness. She understood suddenly the significance of her unconscious mistake. It was before her now, in the slight curl of the handsome lip, the thrust of the chin, the smouldering fire in eyes that reflected buried volcanic rages and disgusts. She understood too that her mistake was in the name, not in the title. The name should be, not Hamlet, but Lucifer.

"You see," the clear voice continued, "he is so essentially irresponsible. I don't think I told you that he married while he was in the Army. It was his in-laws he was living with, and who threw him out when they began to miss things. They can't take action though, for the daughter's sake. He has already got two children; at least, the second one is not actually born yet, but it will be at any moment now. I am to be god-father. It will be my tenth godchild. You see I have quite a large vicarious family. They range from my sister's eldest girl, who is nearly seventeen, down to this unborn brat who will arrive in about ten days time, they tell me. In a way I suppose I look on all the boys at the clubs as children of mine, of a sort. Though probably the fact that I am not their parent makes them confide in me in a way they would never do to a real father. Parental affection is largely a myth."

Kay waited, but he did not develop his theme. After a time she said hesitantly, "I suppose really that is what my story is about; the artificiality of modern family conventions.

Unreal ties left over from times when children were reared to work in their father's interest or on his lands, with the promise of inheritance as their reward. I hadn't thought of it before from the parents' point of view. I must bring that in, mustn't I? After Elizabeth has left home to go to her job in the New Town."

She was for a moment fired with a wish to establish firmly all the logical foundations of her theme. She had seen it at first as the personal history of her heroine, but now she saw that the real interest of all personal histories lies in their relation to universal truth. She felt excitement. This was how Roger always made things clear for her. Her spirit leaped forward.

But he did not answer her question. She put it again in a different form, but still he did not turn his head, and presently she gave up trying to fix his attention, watching him instead.

He was deaf and blind. The outer world had faded from him. She saw then that she could find him yet another name, from a myth more ancient than the first. He had risen from the fiery deeps. The rock was firmly and safely in place over the volcano, and the surface of the shallows was as smooth as glass. He was not suffering any longer. He had followed transcendental paths to an ecstasy of contemplation. Narcissus and the pool were one.

CHAPTER XIII

FROM THIS TIME, Kay began work again on her novel. Every week or so she sent a completed chapter to Roger, and he returned her drafts with criticisms pencilled into the margin or scrawled on the back of a page. She made her corrections in the light of this criticism, sending further drafts for his final approval.

They did not meet, however. Roger thought it was wiser to continue their friendship apart, and Kay was afraid to demand anything, lest she be refused all. She had submitted to his terms in order to avoid despair, but she sometimes asked herself, in moments of exasperation, what she thought she had gained. She tried to persuade herself that the novel had gained, and that her personal desires were unimportant compared with this. But she was not convinced. She knew that her integrity as an artist had suffered. And she accepted this knowledge with a great sense of shame, a feeling of outrage more damaging, perhaps, than any she would have felt had Roger, unloving, possessed himself of her body alone, discarding her heart and mind.

In the hospital ward she worked hard but learned very little. Gwen Oldham had moved to the labour ward to study midwifery, so Kay was spared any more direct conflicts with her. The new probationer was a timid child, whom Kay would have pitied and helped in the old days when her heart was open to the world. Now she was hardly aware of the newcomer, and seldom spoke to her. Staff Nurse, always inclined to moroseness, welcomed a silent colleague, but Sister Blakeley, watching though un-

enlightened, came to the conclusion that Kay had chosen the wrong job, and expressed this opinion to Dr. Mathers in the ward one day.

"I'm afraid you may be right," he said, looking up from a patient's chart he was studying. "But she says there is nothing else she wants to do, and you have no real definite complaints, have you?"

"Oh no, sir. None at all."

Dr. Mathers dismissed the problem from his mind. He acknowledged his defeat over Kay, but was prepared to let nature have her chance. At any rate the girl looked no worse, and her work remained adequate, if no more. She was quiet and seldom smiled, but her youth should rectify that in time, when her present worry, whatever it was, had come to an end. Young people, even not quite young people, had to have an outlet. If one was denied them, they found another. He consoled himself with the reflection that the world is very widely populated. Someone would turn up in time to engage Kay's attention; he was convinced that a suitable outlet would turn up. He did not know that she had already started in secret to fashion one for herself.

Kay's diary began as a result of one of Roger's criticisms. She had not agreed with him, had crossed out his words of dispraise, and finally taken an indiarubber to remove them altogether. In the returned draft he had repeated his complaint, excusing his persistence, but obviously determined to have his way. Kay gave in; altered her paragraph, recast the second half of her chapter. That night, after posting her copy, she went at once to bed, and sitting up against her pillow, took a sheet of paper and recorded her protest.

"Roger is insufferable. Why do I go on sending him my work? Because that is all I have left. He has discarded me, the woman. He only wants the writer—who is me, but not all of me. Why does he want to divide me up? Does he

know so little about women that he does not realise the extent of his cruelty? I wish I could hate him, but I can't. I can't help feeling it is my own fault. Something must have died in me, I think, when Dennis died. Because Dennis loved me easily enough: we only knew each other three months before we got engaged. He kissed me the second time we went out together: at that silly dance with Bob and Judy, when the band were all tight. We were a bit tight too or we wouldn't have thought it so funny. But walking home in the cold air put that right. Dennis said when he kissed me, 'This isn't because I'm a bit tiddly, it's because you are you.' He must have been rather tight still to talk like that, like someone in a film. I didn't think so at the time. Oh, Roger, why aren't you like Dennis? Why do you have to be you?"

She read over this complaint the next evening, deriving a strange cold pleasure from the recorded censure. It satisfied in some sort her need for revenge, without endangering her present very tenuous relationship with him. Writing the fresh date in the margin, she continued where she had left off.

"Perhaps I have never loved the real Roger at all. I may have only seen Dennis in him. Is that why I find it so difficult now to imagine Dennis' face, and have to get out his photograph because I can't remember it? Have I put Roger's face where Dennis' used to be? Is that why I only see Roger as he looked at Springstead in the garden, with the May trees showering down their petals on us, like confetti at a wedding. Oh God, I was so happy that day. Why did I ever meet him? Why did I have to meet him and mistake him for another Dennis?"

But her theory did not please her for long. It had been only a passing thought, and a sentimental one, developed because her pen was fluent and her mind not over careful so late in the evening. After another day or two she forgot

her comparison. One morning Dr. Mathers had been accompanied on his round by two refugee foreigners studying for an English degree in medicine. He had demonstrated his cases in simple words and with great clarity, so that Kay had understood most of what he said and had been interested, particularly in her own special beds, which still included the reluctant Mrs. Austen. Her intelligence, refreshed, took command of that evening's entry in the diary.

"There must be something abnormal about Roger. If I did not attract him at all he would have dropped me long ago. No one could say I have been chasing him. I kept away the instant he knew what I felt about him. He came back at Christmas of his own accord. He must think more of me than he says, more perhaps than he thinks. If only I knew how he feels. He pretends not to feel at all, but it can't be true. He has shown me that it can't be true. That other woman . . ."

Kay put down her pencil while she considered Roger's former love. Her jealousy swept away her careful reasoning. She wrote no more that night.

Gradually, as the days passed, this diary of Kay's grew to paramount importance. She waited eagerly, avidly, throughout her working hours for the moment when, comfortably warm and propped on pillows in her bed, she would open the notebook which now housed the diary, turn to a fresh page, date it, and pour out her thoughts and feelings in unending confusion.

"... So there will never be happiness, never the peace of being loved and loving in blessedly equal proportions, never the joy of fulfilling and being fulfilled. I cannot fight this love; I do not even want to. I know myself well enough to understand that my first need is to love and to be loved. If I know that, why is it impossible to break away? I get nothing from this attachment to Roger. I have not seen

him for five weeks. And yet he is not out of my mind for one single instant of the day or night. What would he do if I stopped sending him the book? Does he really care about it? I think he does, but this possessive care of my talent, if it deserves such a name, only humiliates me. I give him what he wants, because I love him. I would rather give him myself, my whole self. How dare he choose a part of me, and refuse the rest? He makes me hate myself, because he has shown me that I am a failure as a woman. Even if I succeed as a writer I shall never lose that sense of utter failure. Succeed as a writer! That is distinctly funny, when you come to think of it. Because I can never succeed as a writer. I cannot be separated from my talent. He is trying to break that off, wear it as a button-hole, and leave the woman behind. He cannot do it. It will wither like any other button-hole. And there will be no more to take from that plant; it has nearly withered already."

She began from this time to lose any remaining interest she had in her book, and though she still wrote her chapters fairly regularly, choosing a free afternoon or a free hour in the evening to work at her manuscript, there was no vigour in her prose, and the chief characters lost distinctness, merging into one another in a way that entirely defeated her intention for them. Roger's comments recorded this, urging her to stop work for a time if she were feeling too tired to do justice to her plot, or getting too little time to concentrate sufficiently on it.

"I should like to explain to him why I have been writing badly," she wrote in her diary, "but he would not understand. Poor darling, he would not understand. He knows nothing of love. Of passion, yes, a good deal, but nothing of love."

She had decided—it was necessary for her to believe—that he had not really loved his mistress. It had been a selfish passion, she decided; he had cherished it because his

pride had been hurt. He had begun it, no doubt, because another man's wife was a more amusing prize than a girl he would be expected to marry. The dangers of an intrigue would attract him; even its vulgarity would please, by distorting, his fastidiousness.

Kay had plenty of hard words for Roger, but she had more for herself. Her anger and disgust with herself swelled in her mind like a great abscess. It was her response to Roger's immaculate cruelty. Her strictures were forced upon herself; he left her no alternative. She could not hate him. In spite of her hard words he was still the object of her love, while for herself her natural esteem was slowly fouled and corrupted both by self-pity and by the evil insolence of self-hatred.

Some hint of the dangers of her state became apparent to Kay through the babblings of Mrs. Austen, reprieved for a week or two by the physiotherapist.

"Dr. Lumsden is ever such a kind gentleman," she explained to her. "He understands me. That Dr. Mathers now, he may be a clever doctor, I'm not saying he isn't, though there are some in this very ward, and Mrs. Pearce, went out three weeks ago, you wouldn't remember her, it was when you was in the other block, she told me, she said, human guinea-pigs, that's all we are to him. A brilliant man, of course, I'd be the last to deny it. But give me Dr. Lumsden. He's the one that understands me right down to the core. Two weeks he gives me to get the strength back in my legs. And a Home Help when I do get home to do the shopping for me and that."

Fortunate Mrs. Austen, Kay thought. Her failure does not worry her in the least. Dr. Mathers' criticism arouses no response in her but a resentment much healthier than its original cause. Her self-pity is of the robust, demanding, springing kind. Not a sickly parasitical growth, harboured unseen, but squeezing out the life of its host.

"If only someone would tell Roger to leave me alone," she wrote a few days later. "Surely in time I would forget him, and stop thinking about him all day long and talking to him in my mind instead of working. If only someone would tell him that I must stop sending him the book. I wish I knew even one of his friends. But I have never met them. That ought to have shown me months ago that he meant nothing. Perhaps it amuses him to treat me socially as if I were his mistress, without making me so. I wonder how he speaks of me to his friends? As a rising young writer whose literary reputation he is helping to foster? Very likely. If I knew one of his friends I could warn him. They would know if they were friends of his, that he tells lies. He does it quite often; he doesn't even care whether you see through them or not."

It occurred to her that Bob and Judy knew him fairly well, but she shrank from confiding in them. It suited her disordered heart better to imagine herself pouring out her wrongs and shattered hopes to a kindly experienced man, one who had known Roger from boyhood, who would promise to speak to him, and who would comfort her, suggesting that all was not lost, and that some great and wonderful revulsion of feeling might reward her mild forbearance, placing her at length, where she still longed and feared to be, fast against Roger's heart. But she knew of no such person. Her expansive day-dreams only confirmed her in her determination to tell no one of her plight. Judy would be sorry, but not helpful; Bob merely embarrassed. Roger, with his finished technique of evasion, would dispose at once of either of them, should they try to tackle him. There was no one she could approach. Dr. Mathers invited her confidence, but she recoiled from putting her dreary troubles before him. He would only prescribe healthy occupation, something to take her out of herself, a nerve tonic perhaps, or a holiday away from

the hospital. She remembered her Christmas vacation, shuddering. Roger then had pursued her into her home to scourge her with his indifference. Since her walk with him she had not once climbed her much-loved downs.

"Getting outside myself is no good," she wrote one evening when she had visited the ballet with two old school friends. "I was happy while I was looking at the dancing, and at first it was fun to remember the old days at school. But then I thought of it as Roger would think and it seemed sad and ludicrous and faintly indecent. We were all over thirty and laughing like schoolgirls. I could see Roger's mouth curling as it does when he meets anything ugly. That spoiled it: Roger, who lives in my heart and in my head. What is the good of doing things that take me out of myself? I have to go back, don't I? Sometimes I wish I didn't have to go back. I wish I could be a different person. Someone who wouldn't mind what he said or did. Who would write him off as he deserves. But no one can escape from himself. This is how I was born and how I must stay. When I came back this evening I felt fine. The ballet had done what Molly and Jean could not do, taken Roger's image away. I was all right coming back and having my bath. But the minute I got into bed and saw this diary the new peace was shattered. The pain came back worse than before, because it was fresh and strong; it had not spent itself in hours of continuous torture."

She crossed out "torture" with a sense of shame. That was a word to be applied to cruelty in its extreme form. It was a gross exaggeration to use it of her own state. She substituted "agony", crossed that out too, saw that she had already used the word "pain" in her sentence, and gave it up, leaving the words unfinished.

"Do I inflict this upon myself?" she inquired in a new paragraph. "Or can Roger be said to inflict it upon me? Not directly. He has said things that have hurt me, but

only because I love him. If I did not love him I would find him a delightful and amusing and helpful friend. I think that is what he wants to be. Our minds are linked. We never fail to understand one another's ideas. I am not harbouring any fantasy in affirming that our minds continually meet and fuse. *This should have been the place* from where we started to explore together. Why does he set a limit to our relationship ? Why does he hedge it about with trivialities ? Why is he afraid to trust me ? Why will he explore my mind, but not my heart ? I would go with him to the ends of the world, to the limit of experience, to the height and depth of feeling. Why does he prefer his stale unprofitable life ?”

She had no answers to her beating questions. She was back with her enemies, jealousy, self-contempt, self-hatred. The benefit of her evening with her friends was all dispelled and lost, and she turned uneasily from side to side of her bed until dawn. In the ward that day she was more than usually morose. Sister Blakeley found her patience crumbling on several occasions, and finally administered a warning. Kay apologised: she knew she was at fault, but she could not devise a remedy. At heart she did not really want to do so. She wanted to go to Roger: she wanted him to strip her bewilderment from her, and her fear. She wanted to be received into his arms and comforted.

CHAPTER XIV

VIC STEVENS, with his feet firmly planted on the boards of a small repertory theatre, looked back upon the last year almost with incredulity. Was it really he who had spent last summer in a state of idiotic bliss over a man old enough to be his father? Who, from the same cause, had been nearly dotty in the autumn, and rescued from that uncomfortable state by the decent old boy who had shown him the absurdities of adolescence? He had to believe these experiences were his own, but he knew very well he was not going to boast of them. They could go down the drain with his memories of the family rows and the humiliations of being taught table manners in public. No more psychology for him, except Shakespeare's. He had a girl, who was lovely to touch, and a job that was just right.

"Elsinore Castle in the air again, Vic?" his friends asked him, when he was abstracted, counting his blessings. He winked at them, happily. He knew where he was going, and he knew darned well how to get there. In the meantime, the play, the whole play, and nothing but the play. He did not tell them that he was thinking how one of Vera's real-life kisses was worth more than all his sickly day-dreams about Roger. He only smiled at them, and picked up their conversation where he had left it.

But he did write to Roger, very occasionally, in his new extremely grown-up, man-of-the-world fashion, to tell him that he had been given a part with a whole short scene in it, instead of six lines at very long intervals, or a walk-on to fill in the time between the raising of the curtain and the

arrival of the late-comers among the audience. He had even let him know of a short visit he proposed to make to his mother, to convince her of his coming success, about which he had now no doubts whatever.

Mrs. Stevens was delighted to see him. She had already learned that Roger had paid for her son's mysterious illness. So she took the opportunity, while he was at home, of going with him to the Club on a social evening when parents were welcomed, in order to meet and thank the benefactor in person.

Vic himself would have preferred not to go, but his new bravado suggested that the encounter might be a useful test. Also it was difficult to avoid it, because his mother was doing the correct thing, and he approved of that. So he put on a new suit, which, because it fitted him, instead of being several sizes too small, made him look years older than he was. Mrs. Stevens dressed herself in her best, and they set out together, the mother's heart filling with pride as she looked at her son, grown suddenly so tall and self-confident.

Roger's manner to them both was perfect. He flattered Mrs. Stevens by taking her apart to tell her what a success Vic was making of himself, and he set the boy completely at ease by listening to his accounts of his work. Nevertheless Vic was wary. He made no mention of the girl-friend, and when Roger referred in a casually enquiring way to the analyst, he laughed.

"He's given me up," he said.

"I thought you gave him up."

"Same thing. We agreed to call it a day."

"Splendid," said Roger heartily.

Going home with his mother Vic had to listen to a flow of praise and gratitude that touched him very little. As a result of the evening's contest he felt safe for ever. None of the old feelings had been aroused, and Roger had seemed to welcome the change in him. But in a curious way that

Vic could not explain to himself, Roger, the man, seemed to have become obscured by Monkhouse, the club leader. An excellent, an admirable person, old "Monk",—one whom he would always refer to as the man who had started him off on his stage career, but someone who had, as an individual, become a little blurred. Vic was too much absorbed in his own affairs to wish to analyse the change. It was enough that he was free, and happy.

Roger, on his way home after the social, was thinking of Vic Stevens, with feelings in which pride mingled with regret and even annoyance. What a pity these boys had to grow up into loutish young men, conceited and patronising. Last year Vic's truculent shyness had had a peculiar compelling charm. Now a little success, a wage-earner's confidence, and probably the first girl-friend, had taken off that bloom, replacing it with a crude rough surface, unfit as yet for polish, and just like that of a million others. He hoped the talent survived, but it seemed unlikely. Mediocrity was the rule, perhaps throughout life; certainly in the arts.

Mrs. Hedges met him in the hall of his flat. She had hurried there at the sound of his key in the lock.

"That man's here again," she said breathlessly. "Wouldn't take no for an answer. Said he had to speak to you. He's waiting."

She nodded her head in the direction of the sitting room.

Roger took off his overcoat and hung it up with slow deliberate movements that concealed his inward rage. There was only one person whom Mrs. Hedges would be likely to announce in such a mysterious and impolite fashion. It annoyed him to find the man here so late, and at a time when he had had more than enough of social contact. But it annoyed him more that anyone taken for a friend of his should rouse so much disrespect in his housekeeper.

"Do you mean Mr. Gilbert?" he asked gently.

"Yes, him."

"My visitors always have names, Mrs. Hedges."

"I daresay, sir. But they don't all impose on you, nor yet . . ."

"I think I must be the only critic of their behaviour. Who did you say is waiting for me?"

"Mr. Gilbert, sir."

"Thank you."

He nodded kindly, smiled a little, and went into the sitting room. Mrs. Hedges returned to her own fireside with a distracted shrug of her shoulders. This Gilbert lad was just about the limit: she was tired of locking up the master's things every time he set foot in the place. But after those cuff-links, and the silver cigarette case; well, it was a bit thick. Social work was all very well in its way, but this was a police job, say what you liked. Sooner or later, you mark my words, she said to herself, still addressing Roger in her mind, you'll regret it when he's in the dock, and you have to give evidence you put temptation in his way. For it's nothing short of that, she argued, with all those nice things lying about in that room asking to be picked up.

The same thought in its more personal application was in Roger's mind as he opened the door, being careful to make as little sound as he could in doing so.

"Hullo, George," he said quietly. "Mrs. Hedges told me you wanted to see me. Been here long?"

"I don't know."

George Gilbert, long and thin and limply disposed in a chair near the fire, looked up without smiling.

Roger opened his case to offer him a cigarette, found it empty and walked over to his desk.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" he said in an exasperated tone. "Can't you leave the damned thing alone? You know I use it as much as anything in this room. Where is it?"

"In my mac pocket." George Gilbert's voice was sulky, but he did not move.

Roger went over to where the mackintosh was hanging on a chair back and retrieved his cigarette box. It was of silver, plain, well-proportioned, not very large: a present from one of the clubs, on a date mentioned on the outside of it, in token of some anniversary or service he had completely forgotten.

"It's such a damned silly thing to take," he went on, going towards the mantelpiece, where he put down the box. "So obvious, with that inscription on it. Or do you want to be found out? If so, you are amazingly successful."

"I've been fired," said George Gilbert, not bothering to answer Roger's question.

"Not again?"

The other nodded.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?"

They looked at one another, both guarded and resentful. Roger's anger mounted. He had worked pretty hard on this useless wreck.

"You can work—like everyone else."

"I do work. But I haven't had any real training. The Army prevented that. Not for a decent profession, anyway. There's never enough money in anything I do. Then I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit on the side, and I've had some luck once or twice . . ."

"You mean other people have occasionally been too trustful or too stupid to find you out? That sort of luck doesn't last, my lad. It failed with me after a fortnight."

"You're different. I don't know why I act the way I do with you. I don't mean to, Roger. You're the only one who doesn't blackguard me. You're too good to me, really. I think I can't stand not being able to live up to you."

"That's utter nonsense," said Roger firmly, "and you know it."

But there was a smile at the corners of his mouth, though he did not look at Gilbert, but sat in profile staring at the fire.

"Why did you stay?" he asked suddenly.

"Stay?"

"Yes, stay. My dear chap, you put the cigarette box in your pocket. Why didn't you leave after that and get rid of it? Losing your nerve?"

Gilbert pulled himself into a sitting position. His thin sulky face bore a curiously defenceless look.

"I wanted to tell you about the job—first. I haven't been home yet."

"I see."

Roger stood up, turning his back to the fire.

"You couldn't face Madge? Did you think I would produce another job out of my pocket, so that you could go home and say, 'Look, Madge, I've turned that old dope down: he was getting on my nerves in that basement office. And now I'm working for a new man and just you wait till I show you.' Well, I haven't any more jobs, and if I had you'd only fall down on them. I told you before, you are a case for a psychiatrist. I've done my best, but I'm not qualified to treat you. If you can't control yourself you ought to go to a home or something as a voluntary patient. They cure drunks—sometimes—so they might deal with your addiction, too."

Gilbert paid no attention to this advice, which was given him in even tones, with a friendly if irritated smile.

"Come home with me," he said dully. "I can't face Madge alone. If you don't go home with me I shall put myself in the river, and make an end of it."

"Don't be a bloody fool. You don't mean that. The last thing your sort ever does is to make away with himself."

"I shall. I swear I shall if I have to tell Madge. She's been wonderful, but since the baby was born her nerves are all shot to hell. I daren't tell her the truth. You've got to go with me."

"What good will that do?"

"Madge thinks the world of you. So do I, Roger, believe me, even if I don't behave as if I did."

His voice was husky with genuine feeling, and Roger, looking at him, saw that he was speaking the truth of himself, at least of that part of him struggling to free itself of his abnormality. He felt the old impulse to guide the weak and erring into paths he himself laid down for them. He had reasonable doubts of success, for his knowledge of the world was wide, with a view not obscured by any lace curtains of sentimentality. The chap was trying, it seemed. Perhaps with a little more effort, a little more exercise of will, a little more working on Madge, the thing might be pulled off.

"O.K.," he said. "I'll come."

The streets were empty as they walked to the main thoroughfare. Even here the few groups and couples moved along more purposefully than in the early evening hours. The buses were half empty, swinging in to their stops and moving off again with hardly a pause. Roger and George Gilbert took one in passing as it slowed down to some traffic lights. The conductor was too tired or too bored to come immediately for their fares.

Gilbert lived with his wife in one room of a crowded boarding house behind Victoria Street. He was nervous about his landlady.

"Go up as quietly as you can," he urged Roger. "She makes a hell of a fuss if anyone can be heard on the stairs after eleven."

"Won't your wife be in bed?" asked Roger, as this thought occurred to him for the first time.

"Very likely. She won't mind. She likes you."

Madge might not mind, Roger reflected, but he most certainly did. He blamed himself for his lack of imagination in starting upon this journey so late. He stood back against the wall of the landing as Gilbert went into a darkened room.

"Are you awake, old girl?" he heard him say in a laboured whisper.

There was a brief startled exclamation, and a bedside lamp went on. A hurried whispering followed. Then Gilbert came to the door.

"Madge would like to see you, Roger," he said. "She's guessed why you've come."

Roger, feeling more and more displeased with the task laid upon him, approached the light. Madge Gilbert's desperate eyes drew him on. As he came near her she stretched out a bare arm to him. She was sitting up in bed, and her flimsy creased nightdress, tied with limp bows on her shoulders, scarcely covered her. Her neck was stringy, her collar bones threw deep shadows into the hollows below them, and her breasts, swollen with milk for her month-old baby, dragged at the skin above them. Her thin anxious face, its youthfulness destroyed by worry and child-bearing, seemed to him grotesque above the ripe generous breasts. In a small basket-cot propped on chairs beside the bed a baby's head was visible. A bar-cot at the other end of the room held the older child. There was a sweet sickly smell in the air of milk and baby powder and face cream.

"What is it?" Madge demanded in a fierce whisper. "Tell me quickly. Have they—?"

"He has lost his new job," said Roger quickly, "but it's not worse than that."

"Thank God!" she gulped, recovering herself. "I was terrified, when he didn't come in. It was awful waiting, but I couldn't go out, with the children."

Roger nodded. There was very little he could do for her. Ultimately she would take the children and go back to her own parents, if they would have her. But she had not yet reached breaking-point. On the other hand, tied to the babies' needs, she was useless to George. He had not understood before just how useless and depressing.

"He'll have to try again," he said, and knew his words were barren.

Madge covered her eyes with her hand.

"The best place for me is the river," George groaned. He had leaned his elbows on the mantelpiece and lowered his head on to his arms.

"Rot," said Roger gravely. "You don't mean it; you don't even frighten Madge, much less yourself."

"You'll have to take me seriously, when it happens."

"I take you very seriously. So much so that I advise you to put yourself in a doctor's hands at once. Any ordinary doctor who will send you to a hospital mental specialist. You have proved that you can't take a friend's advice, and can't control yourself. You need drastic treatment. Can you make him do that, Madge?"

She looked up with a faint uncertain hope in her eyes. Roger saw that she would give much to hand on her responsibility for a time. He saw too the pain and the steadfastness of her continued love for George. It seemed to him, even while he belittled its worth, the only beautiful thing in that room.

"I'll try," Madge said.

"Can you manage for the present?"

"Just about."

"Let me know if you want me. I have a wonderful social manner with parents."

She understood him and was able to laugh as he meant her to. He left without taking any further notice of the motionless despairing figure of George. Madge was worth

six of him, and she had the situation in hand so far as that was possible.

Roger did not hurry back to his flat. The night was fine, and the buses had stopped running, so he decided to walk. The night air, even in London, was clean and refreshing after the squalor of the Gilberts' lodging. He drew in deep breaths, expelling them again with vigour enough to drive away the depression George had induced in him. To take away also the recurring vision of Madge's great veined breasts he let his thoughts turn to Kay, remembering with a sharp twinge of conscience or disappointment—he did not enquire too closely which—that he had not had any copy from her for nearly three weeks. He hoped she was not ill. Her work had been poorish of late; very dull and stagnant. He thought of her at Springstead, young and radiant in a clear blue dress; and of the early days at his flat, when she had been touchingly shy and domesticated and happy. He was grieved at the change in her. If it did not pass there was only one thing to do. He would have to give up writing to her. He already avoided direct contact: it was better for them both, while her passion lasted. Women always wanted so much—and so little. She must marry, he decided. Find someone who would look after her and give her confidence. But then he thought of the room he had just left, and shuddered. He could not bear to see Kay in Madge's place.

He went along more quickly, putting both women from his mind. His quick eyes took in the night scene as he passed; he missed nothing. He walked through the alternate pools of light and shadow, interested, alert, amused, disgusted, unfailingly curious and always detached. He saw a tramp snatching a rest on the edge of a dark pavement; a drunk weaving his uncertain course across the deserted road, cursing imaginary traffic; a pair of intermingled shadows against a wall; two young people in

evening dress, tired into silence by the night's dancing, looking helplessly for a taxi; a trollop hurrying her customer along, afraid he would change his mind if they did not reach cover soon enough; an occasional policeman; and in the quiet streets near his home small silent scurrying cats.

He let himself in very softly. There were no messages on the telephone pad, and the fire in his sitting room still glowed warmly. He stood by it for a few minutes, repelling the crowded images of his long busy evening. Then he went quickly to bed and at once to sleep.

CHAPTER XV

FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS Roger found himself fully occupied with his routine work. The year was sufficiently far advanced for blue-prints of the summer plans to appear, and if these were as yet in a sketchy condition, Easter was imminent, when the first outdoor expeditions and week-end campings of the season would take place, and must be arranged in advance. The weather was promising too, for late March; frosts at night, followed by cloudless days with that peculiarly clear golden sunshine that comes with a low sun and dry air. The branches of the plane trees across the road from Roger's flat were softened in a mist of their own buds. He watched them from his window, so deeply satisfied with their beauty that he did not regret the country he so seldom was able to visit.

A few days before Easter, however, with all the arrangements made, he felt he could relax. At his office by day there were fewer callers wanting to interview him on all manner of subjects. Extra committee meetings no longer demanded his presence in the evening. He was able to begin his general reading again at the point where he had been obliged to suspend it, and one or two invitations arrived from his very numerous acquaintances.

Among these was an annual event, one that he had never missed: the birthday party of a cousin who had always amused him with his easy enjoyment of life, and whose success in business he admired without envy. He laughed as he read Andrew's letter of invitation:

"Dear old cock, the event of the year comes up again

on the 24th, and mind you don't miss it. You can bring a present too; all gifts are welcome, especially alcoholic ones. Phyllis is still in the south of France, not even coming home in time for my birthday. She seems to regard me purely as a bank balance these days. Suits me, however, as the new girl-friend definitely rings the bell. Oh boy, oh boy! She'll be at the party, heavily camouflaged to deceive Aunt Em, who cannot be put off in spite of senile decay in the big toes. Be seeing you."

Ridiculous Andrew, who must be forty-five at least. Phyllis was wise. She always stayed away till the fit was over. With the children at school until the beginning of April she was not needed at home. Phyllis was the kind of wife a man did not appreciate until he was old.

On the evening of the party Roger timed his arrival with his usual care and skill. He liked to be certain of a fair number of guests to watch his entrance, but not so many that it was in danger of being obscured. He knew his cousin's circle of prosperous, hard-drinking, energetic friends. They always welcomed him because he was so different from themselves, and because, unlike the other cranks and highbrows they met, they could not bully him.

A shout greeted him as he walked into the room. He gave his parcel to Andrew.

"Books," he said. "Don't open them now. They would shrivel in this atmosphere."

"Books! You know I never read anything, old boy."

"You must read these. I think they would amuse you. Bemelmans. If you don't manage to get through them yourself, Phyllis will adore them."

"She won't be back for three weeks. Even if—"

He said something in a low voice that Roger could not hear and moved away among his guests. Roger turned towards one of the groups that was beckoning enthusiasti-

cally. He had learned all he needed to know about Phyllis, and about Andrew's future.

Later in the evening he met the girl-friend. Andrew was monotonously faithful to his boyhood taste, he decided. This young woman was much the same as the last, and also that one's predecessor. She was much the same as Phyllis in her youth: the same well-kept fair hair, wide brow, childlike eyes, small straight mouth. The same dumb expression with, he was ready to swear, the same obstinate prejudices behind it. Only Phyllis had learned from the world and from her life with Andrew. She had an interesting expression now, especially when she was off-guard. This girl, Diana—why were they all called Diana now-a-days—looked dumber than most, and more obstinate; more arrogant, too. Was Andrew going to suffer the fate he had so often risked and so narrowly avoided? Roger secured another drink for himself and one for Diana, and began to shepherd her into the least crowded of his host's three ground-floor rooms.

"You'll be missed," the girl said lazily, hanging her eyelashes down her cheeks. "You're the life and soul of the party. I don't know how you manage to remember all those stories."

Roger laughed.

"I don't. I invent half of them."

"Do you really? You must have a brilliant imagination."

"Only if the gin is up to standard. Andrew's gin is very good. I gave it to him myself last Christmas; or some of the same brand."

He persuaded her to sit in a low chair near a bookcase on which he could conveniently lean. He brought her another drink to set beside her still unfinished one, but did not renew his own.

"To Andrew's future," he said gaily, watching her with close attention.

Diana winced a little, frowned, looked up at him, and laughed.

"You know all about me, don't you?" she said, in a voice that mingled boasting with defiance.

"I know Andrew very well," he answered gently.

"Then it's the same thing, because discretion was never his strong suit."

"You have discovered that?"

"I have discovered most of what I need to know about him."

"Not all?"

"Not quite all."

A fairly open type herself, thought Roger, putting down his empty glass very slowly and deliberately. But how they do all confide! He smiled encouragement.

"And do you like what you have discovered?"

"He's marvellous!" There was no mistaking the genuine pleasure in her full tones, and in the little sensuous movement she made as she uttered them. "I'm absolutely divinely happy."

Divine had been a slang term of Roger's youth, losing its value with repetition. It sounded odd, spoken in all seriousness by this girl.

"You are living for the moment then, and living perfectly? I can almost envy you."

She frowned a little.

"Not only for the moment. For the future. At least—" She looked up at Roger, assessing his value as a friend, above all as one who knew Andrew well.

"Have I an earthly?" she asked candidly.

Roger smiled at her.

"Has he suggested that he might leave Phyllis and the children?"

"No."

"He never has left them—so far."

"It's up to me, you mean?"

"Oh, I didn't say that."

"You say more than most without opening your mouth."

Other people came forward to interrupt this talk, and Roger was able to move away.

But Diana would not let him escape so easily. She was interested in his looks, a more perfect but less masculine version of her still-handsome Andrew. And she appreciated his close knowledge of her lover. This was only her second affair, but already she felt time rushing past her. She had to secure a permanent future before many more years were over. With Andrew if possible. This man might be able to help her. She strove to appear sympathetic and his equal in worldly experience.

"You know a hell of a lot about women, don't you?" she asked him in an aside that gave her time to interpose herself between him and a small circle he was approaching.

"Do I?"

He smiled at her, secretly amused by her tenacity.

"I shouldn't have told you so much about myself otherwise. Andrew said I ought to meet you. He thinks a lot of you. But he can't understand why you live alone. If you do live alone."

"Yes, I live alone."

"Why?"

He laughed; she was as persistent as a child, and now that she was frankly curious, much more entertaining than in her former pose, which he knew she had assumed for his benefit. She was not nearly so confident as she wished him to think.

"I prefer it," he told her.

"You can't. Besides, you are much too attractive to be wasted. A social worker like you ought to know that a man isn't really normal unless he has a woman living with him.

I suppose in your position it would have to be a wife. Is that what you object to?"

"No. I must be just abnormal, I think. Because I am quite sure I don't want a woman there all the time. I am quite the opposite of Andrew."

He was thinking of Kay as he moved away a second time. Perhaps she did not count in the sense in which Diana was speaking of a companion for him, though in many ways she was ideal. But not all the time, not actually living in the flat with him. God forbid. Diana was the type, though, who would never be able to understand his point of view. She was one of these modern women, limited in outlook and culture, who used their freedom to one end only. They liked to call it *normal* behaviour, wrapping up their primitive animal impulses in psychological jargon, worshipping the average, the common mean, which in fact boiled down to the third-rate. I must be an eccentric, he decided, and definitely not modern.

"What are you smiling to yourself about?" Andrew asked him, bringing him another drink. "I saw you hobnobbing with Diana. You seemed to be getting on damned well."

"She told me you made her very happy. She had never been so completely satisfied."

Andrew choked on his drink.

"The things women say to you! I believe you make them up."

"No, I don't. Successful women always boast. Which reminds me. Did I tell you I have a little friend who writes novels? Or rather, is writing her first novel. I think it is going to be rather good. She usually writes short stories. This is the first time she has begun to expand."

"Under your influence, of course?"

"I shall see her through the novel."

Andrew looked at his cousin with admiration.

"You are without exception the most immoral chap I have ever come across."

"I don't see why."

"That's what I mean. Are you going after her via the novel?"

"Certainly not."

"But she has fallen for you, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid—"

"You'd better lay off. Women novelists are dangerous. She'll put you in a book. A woman scorned, you know. You look out!"

"It won't last. At least—"

"Don't be a hypocrite, old boy. You love it—always have. Why can't you find some lovely normal girl like Diana and settle down? You're free, and you do nothing about it. God, I only wish I was in your shoes."

"No, you don't," said Roger, looking at him affectionately. "You're counting up the days to the school holidays, when you will see Phyllis and the kids again."

"Hush!" Andrew looked round fearfully, but Diana was in one of the other rooms. "Don't say things like that. Life is complicated enough as it is."

"That's the way you've always liked it," said Roger. "I don't. I like it very simple. We all get the life we really want."

"Roger!" a voice called from the other end of the room. "Come and do The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God. I've promised them they'll laugh themselves sick. You can't let me down."

"Come on, Roger!" other voices echoed.

"You're for it, old man," said Andrew, clapping him heartily on the shoulder.

The performance was a great success, much applauded. An encore was demanded and given. After that Roger went home, partly to avoid the mistake of cheapening, by

overplaying it, the effect he had made, partly because he was genuinely tired by so much social effort. He left while his general impression of the evening was one of pleasure, both given and taken. He arrived home in an exalted dreamy state, very much at peace with himself, and both satisfied and amused by his fuller knowledge of his cousin's private affairs.

On the desk the evening post included, among letters from boys and organisers, an envelope with Kay's familiar writing. Mrs. Hedges had arranged it at the top of the pile, perhaps deliberately, Roger thought. He was sure that she read his letters, and had for a long time taken the precaution of destroying at once anything he would not like her to see. For the rest he felt she was welcome to her little pleasures, and so took no pains to keep any of his ordinary correspondence hidden. It lay jumbled in the centre drawer of his desk, and he had no doubt that Mrs. Hedges regularly stirred the pile to find some new item of interest to herself.

Having read Kay's letter, he dropped it into this drawer. The business questions and answers he put under the paper-weight for further consideration the next day. He wished that people would write to the office and not to the flat, but they knew his secretary opened the office mail for him, so they reached for his private ear in this way. A long letter from Vic Stevens he folded up again and tucked into the back of his wallet, where he already held preserved several earlier specimens from that interesting case.

Still wearing his overcoat he sat down near the fireplace, frowning at the white ash of his dead fire. The night was cold, for March had still ten days to run, and the frosts persisted. Kay's letter had made him aware of the cold. He thought of his references to her at the party; of the impression he had deliberately given Andrew; of Diana's casual commonsense advice. The letter, in a tiresome,

quiet, unspectacular way, made nonsense of his descriptions and attitudes. Kay simply asked him as a friend to meet her to talk about her novel. She said, which was true, that written explanations came too late and at too infrequent intervals to make discussion possible. She was finding the work increasingly difficult to manage. She was seriously thinking of giving up her attempt. Did he not think that her old medium, the magazine short story, was the only one suited to her limited capacity? Would he talk it over with her and help her to decide?

Upon reflection, and when his cold body protested against the foolishness of sitting any longer over an empty grate, Roger gave way and wrote a short postcard agreeing to an evening for talk. With some idea of limiting its scope he suggested they might see a play, and eat before the show at a restaurant near the theatre. He was determined not to have her in the flat after so long and emotional a gap in their intercourse. Her letter was quiet enough, but he had not forgotten her former outpouring. On the other hand the success of his evening, the gay chatter, the admiration, the food and drink and warmth and light, in which he had shone, he felt sure, with extraordinary brilliance, gave him now a feeling of godlike magnanimity. He longed with all his heart to be good and kind, to show in its very essence the loving kindness of God, not so much through him, as in him; as an attribute, which it surely was, of his own nature. A power for good, someone had once described him to himself. Who had said that? A man of insight, obviously. Power for good. Power.

He rose at last and went to his bedroom, walked slowly in the full majesty of his state, knowing what he must do for Kay and how he must do it. The weight of his resolve pressed heavily upon him but he rejoiced that his strength was equal to the burden. Kay must not become a lost sheep. He would bear her up and sustain her weakness.

He would deal gently with her, and afterwards she would write her novel. His craving would not be satisfied with less than this.

The postcard he had written lay unheeded on his desk until the next morning, when Mrs. Hedges found it, read it, and posted it.

CHAPTER XVI

KAY HAD NEVER ADMIRER Roger's looks so much as she did at their next meeting, which took place within a few days of their correspondence. She had arranged to meet him at the restaurant where they were to dine, but as she walked towards it down the street she saw him approaching from the opposite direction. He did not see her at once, and she had time to dwell on the clean-cut lines of nose and cheek and chin, the curving sensitive mouth and fine colouring. At a distance he had again the appearance of his early photograph. As she drew near him she saw the differences wrought by time, and she tried to persuade herself that experience which had cut so deep must have brought understanding with it. When he came quite close, and recognised her, his smile flashed instantly with a warm welcome. Kay felt her spirits mount, though she did not relax her guard.

"I hope you are not suffering from chilblains," said Roger, when they had been settled at a table. "Life in institutions always seems to lead to them. And in offices, too. My secretaries are all being martyrs to chilblains at the moment. They show me their horrible red bloated fingers and expect me to be sympathetic."

"I haven't got chilblains. I used to have them at school, though."

But Roger, having established his dislike of the complaint, which had been brought to his attention by two girls in the bus on which he had travelled to the restaurant, now lost interest in it. He began to read the menu aloud to Kay.

For her the evening had already begun to go wrong. Not on account of his pointless talk about chilblains; at any other time it might have amused her. But because as she took off her coat he had stared and blinked his eyes at the striped two-piece dress and jacket she wore beneath it. The two-piece was new, bought for the present spring and following autumn. She usually wore plain colours or tweeds, but had taken a fancy to the stripes because they were gay and different from her accustomed choice. Roger's gesture, which had been quite spontaneous, implied distaste, if not disapproval. She felt cast down by it, and lost all the self-confidence she had gained, as they entered the restaurant, from being in his company. She was thankful to remember that they were going on to the theatre, where for most of the time there would be no need to talk. She listened attentively to his reading of the menu, then agreed to the dishes he recommended. Roger thought she looked pale and ill in her unfortunate striped get-up. He wondered what he could possibly talk to her about until the food came. Her book must wait until after he had eaten. He could not be helpful on an empty stomach.

The restaurant, with gilt-edged wall mirrors and red plush seats on the chairs, and great chandeliers like brass Christmas trees, had a strongly nineteenth-century atmosphere. There were a number of middle-aged women in smart hats and frilled blouses, whose plump arms, hung with bracelets and bared for action, recalled the pictures of Renoir and Lautrec. The proprietor, a small man in evening clothes with fluffy grey hair in a fringe round his bald crown, went among the tables carrying a small tray of flowers done up in little bunches, which he presented to the ladies among his customers. Kay thought this a charming foreign gesture and received her gift with a pleased smile.

"Pin?" said Roger, taking one from the lapel of his jacket.

He handed it with the head towards her. She had no grounds for complaint. But she was vaguely disappointed. If Roger had chosen to take advantage of it, he could have used the proprietor's graceful and welcoming gesture to close by a little the gulf now present between herself and him. In the proprietor's country, where Aphrodite is worshipped with solemn and fitting ritual, not, as in puritan England, wrapped up in winding sheets like an unclothed dummy in a draper's shop window, the flowers would have been a symbol, to celebrate an occasion, to decorate the shrine of a relationship, to bear homage to beauty, especially beauty dedicated to man's needs. As it was Roger offered her a pin.

"Thank you," she said unsmiling.

She fastened the flowers to the front of her dress; they were early primroses, and their freshness in that warm glittering room brought tears to her eyes as she bent her head to smell them. Roger had turned to look at the other diners, or to follow the movements of the waiter, she did not know which.

"A comic crowd," she said, trying to assume a gaiety she was very far from feeling.

"I don't find them particularly amusing. But then, I don't really like people in the mass. And in London there are always far too many. Even the people who like having a crowd around are rather daunted here. Or so they tell me."

She had heard this often. It was strange, she thought, to hear him repeat these statements of opinion, in the same words, in the same manner, every time they met. Almost as if they always met for the first time. Friendships based on conversation were barren, she decided. You had to do things together, work, play, or live together, to build a real friendship. In her truthful inner mind she knew that she was bored. But when she looked at Roger again her

heart clamoured to find some way of overwhelming him with the passion that possessed it.

She did not bother to follow up his opinion with her usual protests and qualifications. He knew them all far too well. She let the talk languish. Indeed, she had nothing to tell him. He never wanted to hear about her work at the hospital, and as for the novel, which she had made the means of bringing them once more into one another's company, she was determined not to speak of it at all unless Roger gave her an encouraging opening. Of this there was as yet no sign.

"We had better have our coffee at the theatre or cut it altogether," said Roger as their meal came to a leisurely end. "I hate to risk being late. Apart from treading on people's toes and rousing universal hatred, I can't bear stumbling about in the dark, and I think it is abominably rude and inconsiderate to the actors."

"I'm sure it is."

"Shall we be moving then?"

"I'll spend a penny while you're getting the bill."

During the first interval at the theatre Roger told her about his recent party at his cousin's house. She listened with all the old sense of envy she always felt when he described his many acquaintances. Though she suspected that the glamour he cast over these scenes was false, she could not withstand its influence. What fun they could have had together. She, who understood so well everything he told her, would surely have been an ideal companion with whom to share such experiences, on the spot, at the time of their happening. She envied particularly Diana, who had triumphed so easily just where she herself had failed.

"Obviously a gold-digger," she said, when he had described Andrew as Diana's second lover.

"Not entirely. I must say she seems to go after older men, and they are more likely to have incomes than younger

ones. But she seems to be genuinely fond of Andrew. Women do find him very attractive."

"It runs in the family, doesn't it?"

He laughed.

"Only your cousin has no inhibitions."

"Obviously not. But he has his limits."

"Is he going to get a divorce?"

"No. He is quite certainly not going to lose the children, or Phyllis, though he doesn't appreciate her fully, nor his own feeling for her, which is very complex."

"I suppose Diana goes on hoping?"

"Women always hope—don't they?"

She waited a little before answering, then said in a steady voice, "Yes, they always hope. There is usually so little else they can do."

He made an impatient movement of his hand. Such remarks got nowhere, and were only an embarrassment. The evening, they both realised, was turning out a worse failure than either had feared.

In the second interval, if only to occupy the time in movement rather than talk, Roger suggested a drink. The bar was full, and he was able to spend several minutes waiting in line to be served. Kay stood with her back to the wall, leaning against a mirror, and watching the various couples round her drinking and smoking.

"I had rather a good letter from Vic this week," said Roger after he had rejoined her with their drinks. "He has got himself pretty well established in his company. They have given him the adolescent's part in 'Musical Chairs.'"

"He's going to be a real actor then," said Kay, "not a *matinée* idol."

"That's the idea. Unless he gets too conceited. There is some danger of it, I'm afraid."

"Isn't it only because he is so young?" said Kay indulgently.

"Perhaps so. Here, I'll let you see his letter, then you can tell me if you think his egotism is going to be a danger to him."

He took the boy's letter from his wallet and handed it to Kay. She read it with some misgiving, but she was too much interested and too thankful for a break in the tension between herself and Roger to have many scruples.

The letter was a light-hearted affair. There was some natural boasting, of a very naïve kind, and a good deal of shrewd comment on the other members of the company. His description of the producer's methods with the leading lady made her laugh aloud.

"He's all right," she said cheerfully, as she handed back the letter.

"I hope so." Roger did not seem very pleased. "These unstable types go from one extreme to the other."

"Was he really unstable? I thought last summer he was just having growing pains."

"Pretty severe ones, don't you think?"

She remembered how thankful he had been, at the height of Vic's trouble, to accept her verdict of normality. He had changed his mind, it appeared.

"Not for a boy of talent, which may even amount to genius," she insisted. "Anyway, what was it really all about? An adolescent crush on you; the sort of thing schoolgirls go through in their 'teens."

"You think so? My impression was of something considerably more abnormal—but, as you say—rather inevitable. Read this earlier letter, then you may understand my anxiety."

Before she had gone far with it Kay was profoundly shocked. Not at the contents of the letter, though they were wildly extravagant, and written at the time when Vic was hearing voices and had doubts of his own sanity. What disturbed her most was Roger's casual production of this

letter to support his argument. No eyes but his should have read it. However differently Victor now looked on the world and his own circumstances, he had been in deadly earnest when he wrote the letter. It was a matter of the utmost privacy, and Roger, by his easy betrayal of the boy's inner feelings, showed himself unfit, in the widest sense, to be trusted with any intimacies. She held out the letter when she had read no more than the first page.

"I ought not to see this," she said. "Vic would be furious if he knew you had shown it to me."

He looked at her perfectly calmly.

"According to you, Vic has written off his youth with the greatest success. In which case he would probably laugh at our continuing to think seriously of it."

She could not help acknowledging the truth of this, but it did not absolve him. In the awkward pause that followed, the letter slipped from her hand to the floor. Roger retrieved it instantly and put it back in his wallet with an air that underlined her clumsiness. She knew she was right, but he made her feel utterly inept. They walked back to their seats in silence.

Kay tried to attend to the third act on the stage, but her attention wandered. The whole evening had been a mistake. Roger must be as uncomfortable with her as she was with him. Worse than this, he must have lost interest in the novel, for he had not once asked her about it, nor even attempted to lead the conversation its way. So her only excuse for their meeting had been thrust into the background, unless she could exert herself to bring it forward. Her own shyness, exasperating though she found it, had shackled her speech tonight as on former occasions. Her only concern was to live through the rest of the evening in as little contact as possible with reality.

But she was not allowed to escape in so easy a fashion. Roger walked with her to the nearest Underground

station, for on this occasion there was no convenient bus in the neighbourhood. He asked her when he could expect another instalment of the book.

"Fairly soon. I don't seem to have much time for it, and then I can't get started. I don't think the plot is very interesting. Nothing much ever seems to happen. The people spend all their time thinking."

"It doesn't give me that impression. Of course it seems to move slowly when you are writing it over a period of months. The people who read it will take only a few hours."

"Don't! It sounds too horribly like cooking a meal and watching people eat it."

"It is. Just as bad. Or worse, because you will have lived for several months what they will only watch off and on for a day or two."

She was silent for a few minutes. They came to the Underground station and began to walk down a staircase to the booking hall.

"I shan't be able to finish it," she said sharply. She had an immense longing to be rid of it all, Roger, the book, the characters in it—everything.

"Oh yes, you will. It really is promising, you know. The dialogue is very good. The only thing I miss, if you don't mind my saying so, is some kind of portrait of the people. I know what they are like inside; that is all quite clear. And the plot is developing easily and naturally from them. But I must say I like to know what the characters in a novel look like; their physical appearance. It makes them more real."

"No!" Kay exclaimed so loudly that one or two people turned their heads to look at her. "No—no! They mustn't be real like that."

She was overcome with horror, and bewildered by it, for he had not, after all, said anything particularly strange. She stood, trembling all over, while Roger left her to fetch

tickets from the automatic machines. They were going different ways, and it was time to part. She held out a shaking hand for her ticket.

"I don't want them to be real like that," she repeated in a low urgent voice. "They mustn't be. They mustn't!"

His eyes, looking straight into hers, held no sympathy, and no understanding, only the blank watchful stare she had seen so often before. She turned away without saying goodbye, and fled blindly to the moving staircase.

Her eyes were dim with tears as she reached the platform. She moved without seeing or thinking where she was. She was suffering from a revulsion so profound that it blotted out all normal awareness. Roger's wish was innocent enough on the surface, just an old-fashioned preference for detailed physical description. Then why, she asked herself frantically, had it been so upsetting? Because it had revealed to her, in an overwhelming blinding revelation, the core of his perversity. She remembered the six volumes of Casanova hidden in his cupboard. She remembered Vic Stevens' letters. His life was blameless by common standards, but she saw this now as a satanic, an unholy abstinence. For he had merely transmuted his lusts. He wanted imagination to be clothed in flesh: he wanted to conduct his embraces in the closet of his own mind. And she must be his pander; she must produce beauty of imagined form and feature for his satisfaction. Her living body could not rouse his desire, but her created fancies could, and he demanded them of her.

Feeling sick and dizzy she sat down upon one of the platform seats and closed her eyes. A train roared into the station, filled up and moved on. When she opened her eyes again she saw the list of stations on the wall of the tunnel opposite where she sat. She was on the wrong platform; it was lucky she had missed the train.

Wearily, but feeling calmer now, though her eyes still

dropped helpless tears, she made her way through to the other platform. There were very few people here. One couple stood talking busily not far from where she emerged. She turned to walk the other way. At the far end in this direction she saw Roger, standing near the first entrance, and glancing up and down the line.

Her first confused thought was that she had made a double mistake and the platform she had just left was really the one where she meant to be. But looking at the list of stations on this side, she saw that she was now in the right place to find her train. Why then was Roger here? He was supposed to be going in the opposite direction, and should indeed have taken the train she had heard come in and go out again while she sat with her eyes closed. What had brought him to this side?

When he turned his head and saw her, she knew from the way his eyes brightened and the pace at which he hurried towards her, that his business had been to look for her.

Again why? Why did he seek her out now, when, a few minutes ago, he had been content to let her go without saying goodbye?

"What are you doing here?" she asked, quite openly drying her eyes and blowing her nose. "Am I on the wrong platform?"

"No, the right one."

"I thought it was."

She could not be bothered to explain her former mistake. She said solemnly, "You missed your train."

"Did I? There hasn't been one this side."

"Hasn't there?"

She saw him look curiously at her, and realised the apparent senselessness of what she had said. But if she explained her mistake he might think she had been meaning to follow him home. She said nothing.

"I'll see you safely on board first," said Roger, grave and attentive.

She understood at once that he had feared she might throw herself under a train. Though he had perceived its intensity, he had completely mistaken the cause of her agitation. It was his manner, rather than his words, though they were suggestive, that revealed his thought to her.

She had seen this manner of his before, several times, and now memory led her back through the various episodes of their friendship to the walk home from Springstead. His voice, speaking in just these tones of his lost colleague had said, "I ought to have known he would do it then, and where he would be."

She shivered violently.

"Are you cold?" Roger asked.

"Yes. But it doesn't matter."

She was right. It did not greatly matter. Her body could be warmed, but not her dead heart. Her corruption, in this evening's work, was advanced a stage further. By his latest careless solicitude, directed solely to his own protection, Roger had turned her feet still further from the difficult path back to safety. She stood now on the whirling edge of disaster.

For her thoughts were less of her own predicament than of the poet whose suicide Roger had recalled to her. She understood at last, linking it to her own and Vic Stevens' experiences, the full significance of that tale, which, if she had seen it clearly when she first heard it, would have made her stamp out her newly-kindled spark of love. But it had been that bright spark which had dazzled her vision. What had happened since was inevitable. She accepted it with resignation, and the suicide's end with a sense of kinship that should have terrified her, but did not.

The train came in, and she turned almost gaily to say goodbye to Roger.

"Have a hot bath when you get in," he advised her, smiling. "That'll warm you up."

"There probably won't be any water left. But don't worry. I never felt less like moping."

The train swept her away, leaving her defiance with him as a parting gift.

CHAPTER XVII

“

‘I WISH I UNDERSTOOD HIM,’ Elizabeth mused, staring into the night from her bedroom window. ‘Do other women understand what goes on in men’s minds? Or do they not need to understand? I feel utterly alone, but I know that what I am experiencing now must have been undergone by countless other women. How do they deal with it? What do they do? I wish I knew what importance to give to it. Shall I go away and find another job? Would that force him to make up his mind? I am afraid to go. I know that he has made up his mind. I have an inner conviction that I mean so little to him that he would not much mind my going. And then, I like my work. I believe in this New Town. I want to see it grow and to see people who have been cramped and stifled in London spreading out and developing as so many of the evacuees did in the war. I must not let myself be driven away by a pain that would pursue me everywhere, and would grow, not shrink, if I thought I should never see him again.’ ”

Kay put down her pencil. Her writing hand was cold and she bent to warm her stiff fingers at her small electric fire. When she felt more comfortable, she looked at what she had written. It was two days since she had touched her novel, but she had found it quite easy to continue where she had left off. In fact, since her last evening with Roger, she had taken to writing more regularly. The difficult period, when the plot had stuck and she did not know what to do with her heroine, Elizabeth, was over.

Originally her hero, an architect of the New Town, struggling with some very tricky aspects of his past, and absorbed pretty fully in his work, was waiting for the near-fatal accident, the collapse of the wall of one of his new buildings, that was to teach him how much he really loved Elizabeth. The accident, due to shoddy work, and involving some very dirty semi-political dealings by local officials, needed careful plantings and more technical knowledge than Kay possessed. She could have found it out or read it up, but had never mustered the energy to do either. Now she did not need to do so. Since the evening when she had left Roger on the platform of the Underground, her conception of her plot had changed. The architect had ceased to be a rather dull-witted athletic person with a one-track mind and a genius for creating misunderstandings between himself and those he cared for most. He had taken on a sinister tinge and had become an enigma, brilliant at his work, but quite unpredictable in his personal relationships. Elizabeth, for whom now the near-fatal accident was planned, marked time by puzzling over his character. Kay was quite content to let her do so. She spent the daytime hours in musing, and at night wrote her thoughts into her manuscript. The diary was neglected. There was no point in repeating herself. Besides, since she was now more Elizabeth than Kay Lawson, the latter personage had begun to seem rather unreal to her.

Her fellow-workers, however, found her practically unchanged. Sister Blakeley thought she looked on the whole more settled, less on edge than formerly. There were no complaints from the patients and no differences with the other nurses. Sister felt inclined to try her again with one or two more responsible jobs, but was put off by something in Kay's manner, or rather in her way of listening to orders, which was attentive and yet abstracted, as if she heard from a great way off, not distinctly enough to find

it worth while to follow the words. But all the old appearance of strain had gone. So Sister was prepared to let the moods and tantrums of the winter slip into the past unrecorded. She looked forward to seeing Kay emerge as a fully trained, level-headed, responsible nurse.

"I don't know how long you will be here," she told her one morning, "but I'm sure it is time you went on to the surgical side. You'll find the exams on your back before you know where you are."

"I don't want to change," said Kay, looking down. She knew she could perform the routine of Cecilia Ward without thinking about it. It would be unbearable to be moved to less familiar work, where she would have to concentrate every minute of the day on what she was doing. No time to suffer or rejoice with Elizabeth, her other self.

"You want to qualify, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Sister."

Poor old Blakeley was looking so shocked, Kay thought, that she felt compelled to agree. But of course nursing was not Elizabeth's real bent. In the New Town she worked in an office, as one of those superior girl clerks who tell the others what to do, and never touch anything themselves except their make-up and the files they carry into the director's office. Until the war took her away from home Kay had never been in any office at all, except the family solicitor's. She imagined that the official offices in the New Town, or rather in the old town about to be expanded, must look like a mixture of the solicitor's, the bank manager's, and the places where she had worked as a Waaf.

Elizabeth had a table near the window at the office. It was not such a big window, though, as the one in the architect's room. Maurice, the architect, had an office that looked out across the fields and hills where the New Town was going to be built. At one corner of his view you could see already a small beginning, the continuation of a

housing suburb of the old town. The foundations of the first of the new cinemas were already laid in this part.

"Well then," said Sister, "you'll have to be getting a move on, won't you? I'd better speak to Sister Tutor."

"I would much rather—" Kay began, and stopped. She decided it would be wiser not to argue. The hospital could order her movements as they wished, and it would not alter her inner life one scrap. If they sent her to the surgical side she would make an effort to pick up what was necessary. It was better to agree; much better to avoid arguments.

At Easter she was given two days leave, as a break before beginning her new work. She went home to Crimpfield, taking her manuscript with her. She was anxious to complete the chapter she was writing before the change came, for she foresaw a certain amount of difficulty and effort in the weeks lying immediately ahead. She was jealous on behalf of her story. She knew that her novel held her now as no piece of writing had ever done before. There had been many changes in her feeling towards it, hesitation, fear, enthusiasm, uncertainty. As many changes as her changing attitudes to Roger and to her love. But her last encounter with him had wrought a final change that she thought was irreversible. She was bound now to her novel because she was, in the character of her heroine, dissociated from a normal view of reality. Her true fear was no longer of herself or of Roger. It was that reality might be thrust upon her.

So at Crimpfield, instead of spending her precious two days on the downs, where the springy turf at this season was thick with pink orchids, and the hill path wound between bushes where the air was faint with the heavy sweetness of gorse blossom, she chose instead to stay at home writing. Not indoors, because her parents would have noticed such singularity and questioned her about it, but sitting in the

spring sunshine on the lawn with a sheaf of paper beside her and a heavy book on her lap to take the place of a table.

Her flight from all commerce with the live world had already secured her the protection of cunning. It came to her aid quite naturally; her parents noticed hardly any change in her. On the other hand her mother was curious. Kay had been home very seldom since Christmas and had provided no more interesting shocks such as the visit of Roger Monkhouse the day before the snow fell.

"Shall I disturb you if I sit here?" asked Mrs. Lawson, bringing a low wicker armchair on to the grass beside her daughter.

"No, of course not."

Kay's pencil hung suspended over the paper. She stifled a sigh. Elizabeth, her heroine, in the course of a solitary walk by the New Town's rather insignificant river, had overtaken and passed a strangely assorted pair, namely the chief clerk in the architect's department and a member of the Old Town Council. She had overheard a scrap of conversation not meant for outside ears. She spent the rest of her walk debating in her own mind whether to go to Maurice with her news, or put it from her mind. It was important, but to tell him of it would put her in an invidious position. She would appear in the unpleasant garb of an informer; worse still, he might assume her natural unwillingness to tell tales, and see through her motive to her compelling desire to meet him upon any pretext. Kay had been recording Elizabeth's doubts and hesitations when her mother's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Are you writing?" asked Mrs. Lawson. She could not help being aware of Kay's abstraction and wanted to excuse herself for interrupting her.

"I was." Kay fell back upon the writer's traditional martyrdom.

"Would you rather—?"

"No. Don't go away. I wasn't getting on very fast."

"I shouldn't think so with all the distraction of this lovely sunshine and the flowers and everything. It is the first week we have even thought of sitting out. It's good to be alive."

Kay smiled. In the New Town Elizabeth waited patiently to resume her thoughts and her dreams. But Mrs. Lawson, getting out her knitting, began an interminable rambling account of Crimpfield's recent activities and scandals.

A week or two later Kay spent a free Sunday with the Howards at their home near Uxbridge. She had not seen them for several weeks, but neither she nor they had any spectacular news to give one another.

"The butchers have let you out for the day, have they?" said Bob, whose idea of surgery only included emergencies and accidents. "Have they got more nurses, or something?"

"Only the same as usual. It's my normal day off."

"What about operations?"

"Well, what about them? There are the usual number of admissions off the out-patient list. They came in yesterday and they'll be done on Monday or Tuesday. But it isn't my job to cut them up, or my responsibility."

"Don't be snooty. I never said it was. Who deals with the emergencies, anyway?"

"Derek, to start with."

Seeing their raised eyebrows, she went on.

"Derek Crawford. He used to be on the medical side last autumn. He was Dr. Mathers' houseman when I was in Cecilia. Now he has got a surgical job—in my ward, as it happens."

"Nice?" asked Judy.

"Francis Ward? I don't know. I haven't been there very long, I haven't noticed."

"Not the ward. Derek Whatever-his-name-is."

"Oh, yes."

Bob and Judy exchanged glances. Kay being Kay again—a typical answer.

During the afternoon Bob took Sally and Prune for a walk, leaving the two women together.

"Have you seen much of Roger lately?" Judy asked, when Kay had finished describing her brief visit to her home.

Kay was silent. Now, if ever, was the time to ask for help and guidance, from someone who was not only her own friend but something more than an acquaintance of Roger's. But since she had never admitted to Judy how deeply she was in love with him, it was difficult to present his indifference and strange pursuit of her in its true light. Apart from this the confusion in her mind wrought by her identification of herself with the heroine of her book made her uncertain of the nature of the problem she wanted to discuss.

"*We did a show together a little while back,*" she said with an effort. "I don't remember—"

She did not remember the name of the piece, nor the theatre, nor the name of the restaurant where they had dined. She could only remember Roger's bright expectant look on the platform of the Underground, and the mixture of relief and caution with which he had greeted her appearance there.

"I really forget what we saw," she said frowning. "It can't have been very exciting, can it?"

"I shouldn't think so," Judy answered. "We haven't seen him for months. He seems to have given us up."

How wonderful, Kay thought, to be able to say that so lightly. Summoning all her courage she looked up and laughed.

"I wish he would do the same by me. But he keeps wanting to see my novel as I write it."

Without hesitation, quite spontaneously, she found she had given expression to the secret she wanted to confide to Judy. She had made her supreme effort to state her desperate case, and it had cost her nothing. When she heard the words, so light and so casual, fall from her lips, she was appalled at the unsensational effect they made. It had been too easy. There was Judy, with her still-pretty face, her feet turned in as she always had them when she was relaxed in a chair, one arm hanging over the side of it fingering the cover as she listened. Had she taken in what she must have heard, or was there precisely nothing to take in? Watching Judy's tepid response Kay found she could not any longer believe in her own long agony. She had described her position as she saw it, and the problem had ceased to exist. It would be impossible now to show Judy the intensity of her passion. The words she had just spoken were so utterly sensible.

"Why don't you want him to see the novel?" Judy asked. She thought it was rather silly and adolescent of Kay to want to hide her work.

"He criticises it."

"Isn't that helpful?"

"In a way. But it bothers me too. I'd much rather he kept off."

"It is probably a habit he can't alter now," said Judy. "He is always helping people. Personally I think he's rather wonderful."

She spoke tartly out of her disappointment with Kay's pettiness. She thought she now knew why the relationship had come to nothing. Roger had been put off by the jealous creative side of Kay. She could be very unpleasant when she was crossed, Judy remembered. Her obstinate humility roused a kind of coarse anger in its victim, embarrassing because it had so little excuse in fact.

"Let's not talk about him," said Kay.

But he was back in her thoughts, nevertheless. As before when rational commonsense, or an external objective view, took temporary possession of her mind, the swing back to emotion was violent and disturbing. She might think she had solved her problem, she might even deny its existence, but as surely as this happened, as often as calm reason turned her from the vortex, so surely did passion draw her back, until she spun more dizzily in its grip than if she had never left it. The wraith of Elizabeth, her other self, dissolved and vanished.

Bob brought the little girls back at tea-time, and afterwards Kay played with them before she left. Prune was less chubby than she had been the summer before. She was no longer ruled by Sally, but was beginning to see herself as an active competitor in their games. Kay admired her spirit and gave her all the support she could.

"It isn't fair," said Sally at last, red and breathless, "Kay's on Prune's side all the time. Daddy, be on my side!"

"That would be unfair again," said Judy. "Kay is only acting as a handicap for Prune."

"I want to win," said Sally frankly.

"The uninhibited female," said Bob, ranging himself on Sally's side.

"Come on in with us, Judy!" cried Kay.

In the free-for-all that followed the children quickly retired from full-scale combat to applaud the excitement with shrill screams. At the end of it Kay went to Judy's room to tidy her hair and immediately afterwards took leave of her friends.

She had intended, before she set out, to reach the nurses' home again in good time for the evening meal and afterwards to write the end of a chapter. But since her talk with Judy she felt restless and miserable. She was in revolt against the renewed pangs of her passion, with a vigorous longing for

release she had not known since she began to write her diary. All the fantasy of the last few weeks stood revealed to her for what it was. She understood now that her novel was irreparably damaged. It must be re-written from the tenth chapter or abandoned altogether. So must her life be re-designed. Judy had done her good in showing her how she was wasting her imagination and her gift for loving. Thinking over the changing moods that had assailed her during the afternoon she was appalled. She saw herself swinging by a flimsy thread from side to side of a bottomless chasm. Unless she could stop this sickening and perilous fluctuation she was lost. There was no escape from the plain necessity to save herself or perish.

In this state of tension and extreme awareness of danger she suddenly decided to break her journey, spend the next few hours in the centre of London and go home later. She thought vaguely of a cinema, a foreign film for preference. Without paying too much attention to where she was, only that she knew her train had taken her some distance beyond Kensington, she got out at the next station. With a surge of panic terror she found herself on the spot where she had last said goodbye to Roger.

In her state of heightened sensibility she was almost ready to believe that he would appear before her in the crowd. She stood still, clutching her handbag to her wildly beating heart, too frightened to move. As she turned after a few seconds to regain the safety of the carriage she had left, the automatic doors rumbled together and the train moved on. The live rail lay exposed, fascinating her, as it always did, with the thought of hidden death. Again she remembered Roger's face, peering expectantly up and down the platform. She saw one or two pairs of eyes swing curiously in her direction and fled shuddering to the street.

Moving slowly, impelled alike by her sense of doom and her burning desire to escape from it, Kay wandered along

back streets and across main roads, choosing unconsciously a route that led her by slow stages to the restaurant where she and Roger had dined. Her plan for the cinema had faded. She wanted somewhere to sit down and eat because it was her usual time for doing so. She felt neither hunger nor distaste for food. Since leaving the train her thoughts had moved backwards. It was necessary for her to re-live the evening with Roger in order to see more clearly into his mysterious mind and to extricate herself from the web his image perpetually threw about her.

The place was comparatively empty, blighted by the English observance of Sunday. Its glitter and gaiety were proportionately dimmed; indeed, in actual fact, fewer lights shone there than on the previous occasion, and in a room so full of reflecting mirrors this increased the shadows and the air of desolation. Kay was served by a bored waiter; the proprietor did not appear until after she had drunk her coffee. There were no flowers.

But during her lonely meal, with Roger's voice in her ears and his shape before her in the empty chair across the table, she found a new false calm. Judy's opinion was sound. Roger would never be any good to her as a lover or a husband, and she must stop thinking of him that way. But he was very valuable as a friend; he had qualities that made her other friends colourless beside him. Her fears, she decided, her wild analysis of his character, were all part of the frustration she had suffered through desiring the wrong things. There was no reason why she should not enjoy a sympathetic companionship with him of the same nature as her friendship with Bob and Judy Howard. She was never gloomy or miserable or self-conscious with Bob.

Thus deluding herself, repeating a theory she had already exploded, she finished her coffee, settled her bill, and went to the public telephone in the little square entrance hall of the restaurant. The attendant at the men's cloakroom held

the door of the telephone booth open for her. Very few gentlemen had come in that evening. His haul of tips had been poor. Also he remembered having seen Kay before.

Roger was at home, but he was not particularly pleased to hear Kay's voice, a strained breathless voice, at the end of the line. He listened to a message from Judy and Bob, then heard what he had expected from the beginning, an invitation to spend an evening with her.

"I'm afraid I'm pretty well booked up at present," he said politely.

"I can wait," answered Kay, "if you'll say when you can manage it."

There was a long pause, so long that she thought the line had been cut, and said "hullo" again.

"I'm still here," answered Roger. "I don't quite know what to say."

"I shall be all right," pleaded Kay desperately. Somehow the distance between them made it possible for her to speak more frankly than she ever did in his presence. "I want to break this vicious circle or whatever it is. I'm not usually so depressing. Judy could tell you. I want us to be ordinary friends. We do amuse each other and like each other. I want us to be ordinary and natural."

"That's the trouble," said Roger calmly. "What made you ring up this evening?"

She told him again about her afternoon with the Howards, and explained how getting out at the station where they had parted had made her remember that evening and want more than ever to solve their problem.

Roger did not remind her that he himself had no problem to solve. He had been struck by her story.

"You were on your way back from Uxbridge, didn't you say?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have been on the District Line."

"Yes."

"But I left you the other day at Trafalgar Square on the Bakcrloo."

She was appalled at the trick her mind and heart had played her. Roger must think her mad.

"Of course. How very stupid of me. The stations aren't even very much alike. I suppose I got muddled."

The stations were not at all alike. Now that she was nailed to reality she remembered how very different they were. "I do get muddled, Roger. It's because I'm so worried about our friendship. When can I see you?"

"I don't think," said Roger's voice very clearly and slowly, "that we ought to see one another for rather a long time. I have too much physical effect on you."

It was said gently, with a clinical detachment of manner, but it struck Kay such a savage blow that her self-command was shattered.

"Oh, no!" she protested, her voice rising, so that its tones, coming through the walls of the telephone box, caught the ear of the cloak room attendant, making him listen for more. "You are wrong, Roger! You've no right to say—" She was half-crying in her shock and self-disgust. "I only want—"

Roger's voice interrupted her, icy and remote.

"I'm afraid you are crying for the moon as far as I am concerned."

She protested again when she heard this, but very low and piteously. The cloakroom attendant did not hear her, but he saw with interest how she thrust the receiver back blindly on to its rest and bowed her head over it, sobbing wildly. He felt sorry for her. He had heard her say Roger, and he remembered the distinguished-looking dark gentleman who had given his coat to him one evening some weeks back when this lady—he remembered her distinctly now—had called him by that name. It was a pity—he

felt sorry for the lady, but these English were incurably romantic, though not usually hysterical as well.

He held the door of the restaurant open for Kay to pass out, asking her solicitously if she would like a taxi.

Kay shook her head. The cloakroom attendant shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEREK CRAWFORD straightened his back.

"You'll find my syringe in the steriliser, nurse," he said without turning round. "It must be cooked by now. Would you mind getting it, please?"

He waited, holding his gloved hands before him, smiling down at the patient on the bed.

"It won't be nearly as bad as the last time," he said, in a gentle reassuring voice. "You're over the worst of the dressings now."

"Thank Gawd for that. But I wish you'd make it snappy, guy. It's the 'angin' abart gets me down."

"Just ready."

But he spoke too soon. Kay Lawson looked in round the screen, pale and worried.

"I'm terribly sorry. It was my fault. I ought to have filled it up—the steriliser—I forgot."

"What do you mean?"

"It has boiled dry. I can't think why I forgot."

He was frankly incredulous.

"But that's the second time since you came into this ward!"

She looked very miserable and hopeless. There was a kind of limping droop in the way she moved towards him inside the screens.

"Do you mean the syringe isn't boiled?"

"It's broken." She showed him the pieces she had put into a kidney dish. "It was your own, wasn't it? I'll get you a new one myself."

"Never mind about that! Get me a sterile syringe, a Record, from somewhere. I don't mind where. But get a move on!"

"That's right," said the figure on the bed, screwing his head round to stare at Kay. "You show a leg, nurse. I want to be put art o' me misery."

"Shut up," said Crawford kindly. "And don't fidget or you'll upset the towels and I shall have to start at the beginning again."

"The 'ell you will," said the patient, freezing obediently.

When Crawford had finished his work he left the ward, beckoning Kay to follow him. He led her to a corner of the corridor where they would not be overheard.

"Look here," he said firmly, "this isn't my business, I know, but something has got to be done about you."

She waited for him to finish.

"If you were a natural sap, I'd simply hand it on to Sister. But I know darned well you aren't. At least you weren't last year in Cecilia. What's the trouble, Kay? Don't you think it's time you gave yourself a break?"

Her face had grown very white as he was speaking and now she leaned against the wall, shutting her eyes. But when she felt his hand on her arm she roused herself.

"I'm sorry, Derek. I've been getting rather frightful headaches lately. Sometimes they get so bad I actually throw up."

"Migraine?"

"I've never had it before."

"Then you must take something for them, or report sick. Probably that would be the best thing to do straight away."

"Dr. Mathers is on holiday."

"So he is. But one of the others must be doing his stuff. You simply can't keep making these wild bloomers. It

doesn't matter when it only involves me. But you might get across Flukes himself and then you'd be for it."

"I'll take some veganin. Sister will give me some. She knows I've had headaches the last few days."

"That's all very well. But you ought not to have headaches at all, unless you are sickening for something."

Derek looked at her, frowning. He had seen very little of her for some time because his new girl occupied all his spare time. He felt uneasy about Kay. He did not like the way her lips and hands trembled as she spoke of herself. But he did not want to appear officious, and being very young he did not pay much attention to symptoms when they occurred among his fellow-workers. He still associated disease only with approved and certified patients. Other people, himself, his friends and contemporaries, were never ill, or not seriously so.

Having done what he thought necessary, he parted from Kay with only slight misgiving, which he soon forgot in the pressure of his work. She went back to the ward and found herself some compound aspirin tablets in the outer unlocked drug cupboard, where the aperients and stock mixtures lived. She could not take anything more powerful because Sister held the key of the inner cupboard, where all dangerous drugs were housed. But though she felt it was due to Derek, after breaking his syringe, to obey his instructions, she had little hope of the success of his prescription. She had taken aspirin repeatedly for over a week, but her violent grinding headache went on unchecked. If Dr. Mathers had not been away she would have consulted him. As it was she felt too ill, and much too apathetic, to do anything on her own behalf.

She was not helped by her present circumstances. Sister Martin, accustomed to surgical cases, had not the fine observant eye of Sister Blakeley where her nurses were concerned. She expected everyone to be as practical as

herself, and as much engrossed in the fascinating technical detail of her cases. Besides this, she had not taken to Kay. She thought her morose and queer and made no particular effort to teach her the new duties. And since Derek Crawford had seen to it that neither of Kay's lapses with regard to the steriliser had come to Sister Martin's notice, she was quite unprepared for the shock of Kay's next mistake, and felt it all the more because she blamed herself at once for neglecting this particular nurse's work. For this reason she was unduly harsh to Kay when the news reached the ward.

It involved a case for the operating theatre. The surgeon, Mr. Foulkes, commonly known as Flukes, because so many of his fantastically difficult operations were successful, was working one afternoon on patients from Francis Ward. The second of these returned from the theatre breathing frothily and looking very blue. With him came a nurse from the theatre with a message for Sister Martin. Mr. Foulkes wanted to know when the patient had been given his atropine, how much had been given, and by whom. Inquiry showed that the responsibility had been Kay's. The administration of atropine had been her job; she had given the right injection to the other two cases; she had left this one out altogether.

"Why did you leave him out?" demanded Sister sharply.

"I forgot."

"You were going round with the atropine. How could you forget?" Sister was frankly incredulous.

"I wouldn't do it on purpose," protested Kay miserably.

"Don't answer back. I shall have to report it to Mr. Foulkes as gross carelessness. I must say, you don't seem fit to be in a ward where things really happen."

This was a left-handed cut at the practice of medicine, as opposed to surgery, but Kay was too stricken to notice it. She could only stare at the swollen bubbling lips of the

patient she had neglected and press her hand to her throbbing forehead.

At the end of the afternoon both Mr. Foulkes and Derek Crawford arrived in the ward, following the anaesthetist. The three men went to each case in turn, accompanied by Sister. Afterwards they all stood talking together near Sister's table. Kay watched them from the other end of the ward.

Their deliberations seemed to her as unreal as the rest of her life had become since she was moved to Francis Ward. In Cecilia she had followed a familiar routine which gave her a certain precarious stability. The wild tumult of her emotions had been kept in check at least during the performance of easy tasks that she both understood and liked doing. The change to much more exacting and difficult technical feats had driven her beyond the limit of endurance. Her headaches and sick bouts were the physical outcome, completing a vicious circle. She no longer understood what was happening to her, and hardly cared. She thought only of escape, from the ward, from the hospital, from her debased conception of herself, but above all from the real cause of her disaster.

For the end had come with Roger, and because it had not been of her own doing she could not accept it and go free, but remained bound as tightly as before. She had sent him one more chapter of her novel, the last she had written, knowing it was worthless and confused, but hoping against hope that he would be moved by it to take pity on her state. He had not sent it back; he had offered no criticism, written no letter. A door had shut upon him and he had passed on, leaving her a prisoner in the cell he had built for her. She had not dared to write again or to telephone. This last action of his proved the falseness even of his interest in her writing. He had forced her into a part she was not fitted to play, and he now condemned her

performance of it. She was in a state of cowering frenzy, panic-stricken. Her hands put thermometers into mouths and counted pulses, and all the time her terrified inner self demanded release from unendurable pain.

She saw the figures at the other end of the ward move towards the door. The three men disappeared through it; Sister Martin came towards her.

"Mr Foulkes is furious," she said. "I don't blame him, either. Mr. Crawford said he thought you were not well. It is the first I've heard of it. If you really have anything the matter with you why don't you report sick? I'd rather be short of staff than have disgraceful mistakes made in my ward."

"Dr. Mathers is away," said Kay faintly.

"He will be back tomorrow. You can see him then."

Sister's voice had taken on a gentler tone. She was no fool, and it was not difficult to see Kay's suffering in her eyes alone.

"Perhaps you had better go off duty at once."

"No, please, Sister." She had not yet decided upon a definite plan, but she knew she must be free to move about as she pleased.

"Very well. Early bed tonight, though, and I will make sure Dr. Mathers sees you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sister."

So the same probing and warning would start again tomorrow, the same sensible unhelpful advice, the same veiled threat of dismissal. The iron bands drew tighter about her head as she moved.

Outside the ward she found Derek Crawford in the act of leaving one of the private rooms. He was alone and stopped at once when he saw her.

"Don't tell me to see Dr. Mathers," said Kay, with a faint forced smile, "because Sister has already fixed it for me."

"And a darned good thing too," said Crawford cheerfully. "Will you be all right till then?"

"I suppose so."

"Sleeping?"

"No." She gave him a cautious look and went on. "I haven't been sleeping for days. Not since I began these headaches."

"You'd better have something."

"You said that before. I took veganin. It doesn't work."

"I'll give you something a bit stronger. You can get it at the dispensary."

She watched him write out a prescription for her.

"Thank you," she said, taking it in her hand.

"Don't mention it."

He spoke with mock seriousness, hoping to see her smile. He hated to have her so gloomy. Damn it, when he first got to know her, she was laughing and joking all the time. But there had always been something odd. Those references to a boy-friend. What had there been to make a mystery over? Perhaps it had all been put on for his benefit. These nervy types—far too many of them about.

"Well, so long," he said, walking away with quick strides.

Kay looked at her prescription before she handed it to one of the dispensers. She saw that it was for a compound of codein and felt a wave of irritation pass through her. What was the use of codein? It might dull the headache but it would not make her sleep. All her longing for escape focussed suddenly on her need for sleep.

The dispenser took Crawford's slip of paper from her and went off between the tall shelves of drugs. Kay stood just inside the door of the dispensary. Near her in the wall there were two hatches through which bottles of medicine and cardboard boxes of ointment or pills were being handed to the patients waiting in queues outside. She saw

some of the latter watching her as they waited their turn, and to escape from their inquisitive eyes she moved further into the dispensary, hiding herself behind one of the sets of shelves. She moved slowly along it, looking up at the ranks of glass jars that stood there filled with tablets of many sizes and shapes. She began to look consciously for codein, forgetting that her dispenser had gone away from her in a different direction. When she remembered this she read the names with more attention. Some were unfamiliar, but phenobarbitone was known to her and several other barbiturates of the group. When she saw them she sighed deeply, recognising a goal and the end of incurable strife.

But her mind was not quite made up, or rather some element of doubt made her want to test the strength of her decision. She carried her two drugs, the neat box of codein given her by the dispenser and the handful of barbiturate tipped into her pocket when the impulse came, back to her room. The first she set down on her dressing-table; the second she wrapped in a piece of paper and hid under her clean handkerchiefs.

She was off duty. It was the hour when the more energetic of her contemporaries were setting out for a walk, the lazier flinging themselves into armchairs with cigarettes or sweets to listen to the wireless or perhaps read a book. Sister Martin had told her to rest. Was she likely to find out if Kay had obeyed her? Probably not. If it had been Sister Blakeley she would not have dared to go out, but she knew Martin allowed no personal element in her relations with her nurses. The ward was her sole interest.

Feeling safe from interference, therefore, Kay put on her uniform coat and hat and left the building. There was only one person living who could alter or confirm her present purpose. He had ruled her life from the first moment she had met him; he ruled it still. It was only

fair to him and to herself to seek his guidance now, at this fatal juncture, this bitter end. She would put her intention before him fully and frankly and abide by his decision. She would give life a final chance to prove its worth.

From the bus stop in the main road outside the hospital she began the long journey to Roger's flat.

CHAPTER XIX

THAT SAME AFTERNOON Roger Monkhouse, consulting his watch and afterwards his secretary, found himself at three o'clock free to leave his office, with no more pressing engagement booked for him than a telephone call to a club warden "any time after six." Casting about in his mind for something to occupy him during the interval, he thought of pictures, and after making out a list of the dealers' small galleries, proceeded on a gentle tour of the more promising. This took him until five o'clock when most of them closed. He had still an hour to wait before he could ring up the club warden, and an hour and a half before he would be welcome in his home. Besides this, it was a fine sunny spring day with an exciting freshness even in London air; pale grey clouds floated lightly in a blue sky, and young leaves fluttered on the trees in the parks. A most delicious day, with a settled feel about it.

He let memory dwell on summer flowers, summer growth, harvest fields, the joy and security of bodily warmth not fostered in grates or imposed by heavy clothing, and all the pleasures and healthy rigours of his perennial holiday camp. The pictures in his mind, so simple and realistic, were an amusing contrast with the pictures he had just visited, for the most part subjective work deriving from Picasso and others of his era. On the whole he found their excellences of colour or design overruled by the monotony of the subconscious symbolic forms. He collected all the pictures together, resolving his own into terms of art, the paintings into terms of life, and grasped at once the need for something

more to complete his enjoyment. He lacked the masterpiece to gather up the sum of his impressions and return it to him with the addition that only supreme art can give. He looked about him. He found his unguided steps had taken him into the Mall, and that he was moving towards Trafalgar Square. Quite content he went along without hurrying. The National Gallery was as good a place as any to find what he needed. Better, in fact, than anywhere else in London at the moment, since the underlying beauties of some of the greatest paintings had been uncovered from their grime, proving, as he had long suspected, that the old masters did not really employ mud on their palettes.

He moved from canvas to canvas, deeply satisfied with what he saw. New pictures were interesting, sometimes exhilarating, as were new writing and new music, but the worth of them in terms of greatness and of posterity was not in his power to judge. He could find reasons for his predilections, not expert, but rising from a cultivated taste. He could guess at ultimate value. Here, with the accepted masterpieces, the few transcending works of genius, he need only establish which of them left him unmoved or even hostile, and which struck deep into his inner being with absolute conviction. Before these pictures he could stand and be filled, wonderfully at peace with himself and the world.

Moving along just ahead of him, stopping for equal periods of time, and apparently sharing his likes and his indifferences, was a tall thin man with a slight stoop and bushy fair eyebrows over light grey eyes. He peered at the pictures as if he should have worn glasses and knew it, but had forgotten to bring them with him. After keeping his distance from Roger round the walls of one gallery, he was about to walk on into the next when he checked himself as if to go back again. Roger, who was following as before,

collided with him. They both exclaimed in recognition and surprise.

"Good God!—Roger Monkhouse!"

"Jim—No, don't tell me—Bathurst!"

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"Looking at the pictures. What are you? Keeping a date?"

Bathurst laughed, then checked himself.

"It must be ten years, if it's a day."

"Quite that. Where have you been all the time?"

"I had a quiet war, chiefly in Scotland."

"Don't be so modest. You were a boffin, I take it?"

"Yes, I suppose I was. Norah and the brats were with me and we managed to put some friends of ours into our Cambridge house, so it was not requisitioned. Only unfortunately the friends have nowhere to go yet, so they have had to stay on with us since we came back. Two years, that is. Still, we know them well, so we've no cause to grumble."

The crowd, moving slowly round the gallery, divided to pass the two men. They stood in the middle of a constantly dividing stream. Roger began to find this tiresome and slightly absurd.

"We are causing an obstruction," he said. "Let's move on, and when you have seen all you want, come back home with me for a drink. I have to do some telephoning between six and seven, but you won't mind that, I hope. I'll make it as snappy as I can."

"It's very good of you," said Bathurst, hesitating, "but not unexpected, seeing it is you. You'd better be warned, though. I've got plenty on my mind, and if I do come I shall probably want to talk about myself."

"As much as you like," said Roger encouragingly.

"You haven't changed," his friend answered.

They moved on together, and Roger was careful, until

they reached the flat and he had provided his visitor with a drink, to allow no conversation of any but a general nature.

He dealt with his telephone call next. While he was doing this, Jim Bathurst put his glass down on Roger's desk and moved about the room restlessly, staring at the books, the pictures, the view from the window.

"How long have you been in London?" Roger asked him. "That is, if you are staying here."

"Three days. Yes, I'm not just up for a few hours. Cambridge is a wonderful place, but it has an atmosphere in the vac. that nearly sends me silly."

"I should have thought the term would have been more trying. All those animal spirits—Do you find, as I do, that with advancing age you dislike the just grown-up more than any other age group? Now, I like my boys in the clubs, but I am definitely allergic to the older ones among them and to the younger youth leaders. Odd, isn't it?"

"I don't feel like that at all. Men from eighteen or nineteen up to thirty are intellectually at their most interesting and forceful. They haven't the experience, but they have the ideas and the strength behind them. They have not been driven by circumstances to give up their essentially exploring attitude. They may have suffered, but they look ahead, not back. They are not even taking stock of their position as they begin to do in the thirties. They feel they have plenty of time to make up their losses, if any. No, I don't dislike them at all. I prefer them infinitely to my crabbed and disillusioned contemporaries."

"Among whom you must now count me," said Roger smiling.

"I don't. Apart from the fact that I haven't set eyes on you for ten years, or heard from you either—you always were a rotten correspondent—"

"Incorrigible," murmured Roger.

"Apart from all that, you don't change. You look precisely as you did, you speak with the same voice—"

"And utter the same old platitudes—"

"Shut up! Don't keep stopping me. I'm warming up to a very nice little speech in honour of the reunion. In fact, I'm about to drink your health."

"Thank you." Roger lifted his own glass. "Your own and Norah's."

Bathurst gave him a quick look.

"Why did you say that?"

"Why not? You have already told me that your family was with you during the war and is with you now. So it is fairly obvious that ten years have not changed you either."

"I wish to God that was true!"

Roger had said his little speech looking sideways at Jim Bathurst and noticing the thinning crown and the dry fallen cheeks. Jim might have had a quiet war but it had taken the stuffing out of him. Or something else had. When he heard his friend's low-voiced exclamation Roger's curiosity stretched out a lazy hand, sure of being filled.

"Ought I not to have included Norah? You spoke of her just now. She is not ill, I hope?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

Bathurst moved away again, glass in hand, to stare down at the thin laurels near Roger's front gate. His restlessness annoyed his host, who preferred his visitors to be fixed while he himself wandered the room at will. But he understood the need for patience and was soon rewarded.

"Do you remember Norah at all clearly?" Jim asked him.

"I think so. Pretty figure, grey eyes, not very tall, extremely lively."

"She is all that still, except for the figure. We have three youngsters."

"Good for you."

There was another pause, during which Bathurst moved to the mantelpiece, picking up the photographs that stood there, looking at them vaguely and putting them down again.

"I ought to feel I've done well out of life, oughtn't I?" he said in an aggressive voice.

"Don't you?"

"I feel like hell."

"Why?"

Bathurst moved again, but this time it was to drop into a chair facing Roger. The latter leaned back, knowing that the tide of confidence had turned his way.

"I've got everything a man ought to be proud of," went on Jim with an exasperated gesture of his hand. "Job, wife, kids, all first class and doing fine. I keep kicking myself, and that seems to make it all worse."

"To make what worse?"

"The fact that I don't love Norah any longer."

"You mean, I suppose, that you are not in love with her any more? Did you expect to be?"

"Not in the same way as at first. Of course not. But I expected to go on loving her. I thought we would grow together and in the same direction because we had been so marvellously happy at the beginning. The devastating thing about it is that we don't quarrel. We don't have any serious differences. We stick up for one another, we go about together; everyone calls us an ideal couple. And for the last three years I have had no feeling for her whatever. She might be my sister. And as if that wasn't bad enough, I feel spiritually alone. Completely and utterly alone."

"How does Norah take it?"

"She doesn't seem to notice. She lumps me in with the children as something to cherish and work for. She does it quite admirably, too."

Roger's fingers played delicately with the corded seam of his chair cover. He did not look at his friend.

"I know it must sound scatty to you," said Jim ruefully. "I seem to have got it on my mind the last few months. So much so that I was getting definitely run down. I was told to take a holiday away from home, so as soon as the vac. began I came up here. I thought it would be a change and there would be plenty to see that I had missed for too many years. I haven't been in London for more than a day since the war ended. I never expected to run into you, though. It was like an answer to prayer."

"Without the prayer," said Roger gently. "You could have found me if you'd tried, you know."

"I thought of it, but I wasn't sure what had happened to you in the war, or whether you still lived here."

"I did A.R.P. in the war," answered Roger. "They didn't want me for the Army, which was just as well. I should have made a very bad soldier."

Jim Bathurst smiled.

"Still as modest as ever," he said. "Perhaps I should have had a look through the telephone book if I hadn't happened to run into you. It is quite true I have been thinking of you. My troubles sound trivial spoken aloud, but I really am desperate. I can see no way out. My life seems to be drying up. At forty-one that is rather a grim prospect."

"Do you mean that this lack of feeling towards Norah affects everything you do?"

"Yes. I never did any really good work until I began to lead a full life when I married her."

"Has London provided any solution—or temporary relief?" asked Roger gently.

"You mean women? No good. I've tried it, but you might as well suck a boiled sweet to fill an empty belly. All that has done is to show me the hellish difficulties of finding any way out. Our failure, Norah's and mine, is not

a physical one, not on either side. It is a failure of imagination; and a failure of growth, perhaps. She used to stimulate me. I could discuss everything with her. Perhaps it was only being in love with her did it. Anyway we never discuss anything now except domestic problems."

He looked enquiringly at Roger, who met his gaze but soon turned away. The latter found himself temporarily at a loss. Jim's problem was very different from those he was accustomed to deal with. It was much more difficult, more indefinite, more elusive. He was not sure that he understood the position fully. What did Jim want? To preserve the romantic attachment of his youth? To achieve the sort of ideal relationship he had been told of once or twice, but had never met outside literature? Or merely to find some way, other than the usual adultery, of overcoming the inevitable boredom of prolonged marriage?

"Are you not taking the whole thing too hardly?" he asked, with a sympathetic glance at Jim. "You must remember that it is just as easy to fall out of love as it is to fall into it."

Jim Bathurst made no answer to this. Instead he concentrated on his glass, watched Roger fill it up when he had emptied it, sat back comfortably in his chair and began to discuss the biological research on which he was at present engaged.

"I rather suspect this visit to London was as much in the interests of your job as of your private life," said Roger, smiling.

Jim returned his smile.

"You may be right. The job insists on being given plenty of attention. More than poor Norah does, bless her."

There was an exasperated tenderness in his voice as he returned to his obsession.

"I'd better be going. Seeing you seems to have done something to me. Taken me back into the past, I'm afraid,

and made me more conscious than ever of my shortcomings. My pride must have been behaving like the ostrich. Now the sand has blown away and I don't like it. Can I come along for another chat before I leave?"

"Of course. I'd be delighted. Ring me here any morning early and you'll by-pass my excellent secretary."

Roger went with his old friend to the door of his flat, but he did not walk down the stairs. He watched Jim Bathurst out of sight, then went back into his sitting room to see him emerge on to the short garden path and turn out through the gate.

"Not going straight back by Underground," he thought, noting Jim's direction. "A walk first to wrestle with his problem. The eternal problem. The unanswerable complaint."

Hearing the front door of the flat open and shut Mrs. Hedges left her room to ask for orders.

"Excuse me, sir, will there be two . . . Oh, he's gone! Not staying to dinner, then?"

"No, thank you."

"Just as well. I was trying to think whatever could I give the two of you."

"You are let off for once. But if Mr. Bathurst should happen to ring me up when I'm out invite him to come here whenever he can. He is a very old friend of mine, whom I have not seen for years. He lives in Cambridge."

"Very good, sir."

Jim Bathurst was thinking as he moved away from the house how wide the gap now was between himself and Roger. For ten years they had each been concerned with the young; he with their working hours as students, Roger with their free time after manual or technical labour. Roger would call himself a professional sociologist, and yet, faced with one commonplace situation, he had been surprisingly unhelpful. Jim was more disappointed than he

cared to acknowledge to himself. He had come upon Roger suddenly when his mind was filled with colour and form, released altogether from the tension that wore him down; it had been like a miracle of good fortune. He had expected some revelation, an adjustment of his outlook that would make life hopeful again. In his youth Roger had never failed to inspire him and to show him the truth about himself. But this time nothing had happened. The old Roger, seemingly tired, cynical and resigned, offered him precisely nothing. What had he said? "It is just as easy to fall out of love as it is to fall into it." True, if by love you meant mere physical attraction backed by a sentimental outlook. Poor old Roger, the confirmed bachelor; that must be exactly what he did mean. Jim speculated idly about Roger's private life, but soon gave up for want of evidence. The man had always been rather odd; inspiring, but not like most men; not religious, but perhaps a bit of a mystic. He was in the right place, with boys—so far, and no farther—that sort of thing. But for adults, the basic lack of experience, the essential blank. Poor old Roger!

CHAPTER XX

FROM THE END of the road Kay stood watching the gate of Roger's house. She would have liked to cross over in order to look up at the window of his sitting room, but she was afraid he might see her from there. So she stood with her back to the low wall of the last house in the road, waiting.

She had come up out of the Underground with a feeling that at last her problem had been made simple and could be realised completely. It had become urgent, an emergency, and so a solution of it must and would be found. With a woman's instinctive preference for a scene, she looked forward to presenting herself in this light to Roger. She had walked along briskly, eagerly. And as she turned the corner at the end of his road she had seen him, with a tall man at his side, going up the short path from the gate to the front door of his house.

The unexpected is always slightly shocking. This development, totally unforeseen by Kay, checked her steps so suddenly that she was overrun from behind. There was confusion, apology, surprise, and then the eddy settled; she was alone again, halted fifty yards from her goal, and stunned by the inexorable march of her ill-fortune.

An hour later she was still there. At first she had told herself with desperate inventiveness that the visitor would not stay long. He was a casual acquaintance, perhaps a neighbour. He would be given a drink and after a few minutes of casual talk he would go on his way towards his home. Or he might be a colleague, come to collect

some papers or information. She would wait for ten minutes after he had left the house, then present herself at Roger's door. She knew, after all, that he was certainly at home; she was spared the anti-climax she had feared all the time since leaving the hospital.

But Roger's companion did not reappear. The slow minutes passed; she counted them desperately, clung to them as they moved on, pulling down the curtain of the night upon this last act of her life. In the western sky a clear green light had followed the sun, but now this too faded. Lamps came on in the windows. Kay, watching a figure move against the light in one of them, saw it swallowed up in a wildly fluttering mass of little dark forms, like a flight of small birds across a field. She was delighted and puzzled until she realised that the shapes were only the young leaves of the plane trees opposite Roger's windows, *thrown about by a breeze that had come upon them suddenly*. She remembered the golden leaves of the autumn before, and the black branches of winter, and she reflected that she had not seen the trees in bud. She had not visited the flat at all this spring.

The plane trees were again swept by the wind. Though her illusion was dispelled, she still saw the silhouetted leaves as birds, captive birds bound to the twigs of the trees by their feet. When the breeze came they beat their wings madly, lifting themselves in the air and tossing together. But they could not escape. She watched this happen several times, and then someone pulled the curtains together in the lighted room behind the trees, and birds and branches together disappeared in the growing darkness.

She watched the passers-by. A few of them glanced at her as they moved along, but most of them kept their eyes ahead or turned their faces towards a companion. She was conscious of her remoteness from their lives, from every life except Roger's, and he had shut her out. The stranger who

was with him now stood for the eternal barrier in her way. It was exactly in keeping with the situation that had always existed between them; herself alone, Roger surrounded by admiring or suppliant beings. The contrasting picture, made more vivid by her position, standing there in the dusk like any beggar against a street curb, while he sat talking in his lighted room, had always had the power to drive her lower in her own esteem. It thrust her down now, it obliterated the small flicker of self-importance induced by her sense of emergency. Her self-contempt spread to embrace the world, the unheeding passers-by, life itself. If she had no place in Roger's existence, and that surely was proved now beyond doubt, she had no place anywhere. It was time to go.

But she did not move. A terrible lassitude possessed her. She wanted death to extinguish her unsupportable pain, but she wanted death to seek her out, here within sight of Roger's home, so that she could have the illusion of his presence in her last moments, as her last thoughts would inevitably be of him and of her passion. She remembered again the poet who had encompassed his death within sight and sound of Roger's holiday camp hut. Even this must be denied her; for she had left behind the means to her end. She had managed poorly, so the screw of suffering would be given a last pinching turn. She must exert herself for her release; no one else would.

In the end a stranger's solicitude set her on the homeward journey. He noticed her pale strained face as he passed her, and came back to know if she needed help. She fled from the dangerous intrusion of reality.

And now everything became unexpectedly easy. She did not have to wait long for her train, nor for the bus that put her down near the hospital. She went straight to her room, no one meeting her on the way. She was astonished to find it was only three hours since she had left it. If she hurried a

little there was still time to send a letter to Roger by the last post.

It was soon done. She had known for weeks past what she would say to him when this moment arrived, and she found the words flowing easily, like a passage learned at school and never forgotten. She fastened her letter into an envelope, addressed and stamped it, and laid it on the table. Then she collected together her diary, all the letters Roger had written to her, and the unfinished manuscript of her novel, making a brown paper parcel of the whole. She took this under her arm, and the letter to Roger in her hand, and went down the stairs of the nurses' home again. The posting-boxes in the home and the hospital had been emptied, but she would be just in time for the box at the corner of the road, which was cleared at nine. She dropped her single letter through the slot with a feeling of thankful finality. In fairness to Roger she could not turn back now.

With her brown paper parcel still under her arm she made her way into the basement of the hospital and to that part of it where the furnace for the central heating stood.

There was a night watchman who looked after the furnace, and made the rounds of the basement and the general stores and the deserted out-patient department. The casualty room, open day and night, was at the other end of the building and outside his beat, but he was well known to visit there because the night nurse would always give him tea. Kay hoped to find him absent, so that she would not be noticed setting about her unusual errand.

She found, as she hoped, the furnace room deserted, but instead of making her task easy, this rendered it impossible. For she found she did not know how to get at the fire, and she was afraid to try experiments in case she should make a wrong move and one that might be dangerous. She stood, frowning and thinking, drawing a foot to and fro on the floor, gritting with coke dust. Above her a naked electric

bulb in a wire cage hung from the low ceiling. From the great pipes on the wall a low hum filled the room. It was very hot and airless. She felt sweat spring out between her neck and the collar of her dress.

She began to worry about being discovered in this place. What excuse could she give for being found here at this time of day, or at any time for that matter? She would have to make a trivial excuse that would evade explanation, and walk away with her parcel unburned. And then what would she do with it? Her one-line electric fire in the wall of her little bedroom in the nurses' home was no good for her purpose. The open grate in the common room was too public; anyone might disturb her there. This was the best way, if old Barnes did not delay too long.

When he arrived some twenty minutes later the old man did not at first see the uniformed figure standing so quietly against the wall near the door. He stumped across the room to his furnace, took a long iron bar in his hand, and with it opened a small door at the side. Kay had not seen this door, though she had remarked the bar leaning against the wall; it annoyed her to find that her practical sense had failed her in this way. As the little door swung back a red glow filled the room. Kay stepped forward.

"Please, do you mind putting this parcel of waste in the furnace? I don't want to leave it till the morning."

The old man dropped his bar with a clatter.

"Cor, miss, you didn't 'alf startle me! Where did you spring from?"

"I came in a minute ago. You weren't here, so I waited."

"I didn't see you," he muttered resentfully, thrusting his bar into the furnace to clear the ash.

"Could you, please?" asked Kay, holding out her package.

He eyed her distrustfully. It was to him an extraordinary request. None of the nurses had ever come down here

before on such an errand. He foresaw trouble if they were allowed to make a habit of it.

"Why don't you put it with the lot for the incinerator?" he asked.

"Because it ought to have gone before," Kay lied. "I forgot it. Sister would be furious if she knew. It has germs in it—dirty dressings. It ought to be burned at once."

"Oh well." He took it from her. "As long as you don't make a 'abit of it. Don't feel like no dressings to me," he added suspiciously.

"That's the plaster," said Kay. "I had to fold it over to wrap it up."

"You should know," said the old man. He thrust the package into the fire and pushing it further in with his iron rod closed the little door again. The glow faded from the room; the electric bulb shone hard against the grimy ceiling. Wincing from the sight of the darkened furnace Kay turned away saying "Thank you" in a strained voice that sounded anything but cordial.

Barnes watched her go with a sour look.

"Catch me obliging 'em again," he muttered to himself, "if that's all the thanks I get."

He was sorry he had already been to Casualty for his first cup of tea. He would have liked to tell Nurse of these goings-on. Now he would have to wait till after midnight, when he would be finishing his next round of inspection. He got out his evening paper and drew his chair up close to the furnace. This was the way to beat the rheumatics; better than all their old fancy machines rolled into one.

Kay went straight back to her bedroom. The novel had gone, the diary had gone. Her letter was posted. Like a traveller whose luggage had been sent in advance she felt uneasy, lost. All the arranging was over, the packing finished. But because her belongings were no longer about her she had nothing to do. Except start upon her journey.

She crossed her room, parted the window curtains and looked out. Her bedroom was two floors up, above a narrow street, and there was nothing of interest to see there. Over the roofs there was a glow of lights from the neighbouring main road. Lights twinkled on the hill straight ahead, where the better residential quarter of the suburb lay. This scene had never had any part in her life. She could feel no regret at leaving it.

Nor in leaving her home. She crossed the room again to look at the photographs on her dressing table: her father and mother in the limp leather folding frame she had had for her cubicle at school; a snapshot of the house at Crimpfield seen from the garden, a study of clouds above the downs. Her two pictures were also of the downs, modern impressionistic sketches in light wood frames. The downs had always received her and given her joy. But joy now meant Roger as she had first known him. She recoiled from the thought of joy, and looking at her watch began to hurry on her final preparations. Her time was not her own in this place. She would not be left undisturbed for longer than the regulation number of hours.

Breathless with effort she got herself to bed. As if she were laying out her own corpse, she washed, dressed herself in a clean nightdress, brushed and combed her hair. But forgetting this part that her body would play, and thinking only that strangers would be asked to see her, she made up her face very carefully to meet them. Then she swallowed her store of tablets, washing them down by twos with water in her tooth glass, and getting under the covers, lay back to wait.

At once all the events of the year crowded upon her and with them the emotions they had roused in her. She felt herself torn as never before by a fundamental sense of injustice, not only on her own behalf but on Roger's also. Life had been a trap for them both.

She stretched out her hand to the table beside her bed. The habit of the diary had grown upon her. She remembered at once that her notebook had gone, but her library book was there, and the pencil she had always used. With an effort she got hold of both.

Her heart was thudding now, and she felt a tearing and churning in her breast that made breathing difficult. But she managed to open the book at the blank page inside the cover. There was one more thing she must do. Derek, who had given her a prescription, and the dispenser, who had made it up, must both be protected. No traps for them, no injustice, no tricks of fate. She wrote, "I have done this on purpose. I stole the stuff from the dispensary. No one is to blame. It was on account of a private sorrow."

Her writing faltered at the end, because her sight was blurred and her fingers could scarcely hold the pencil. But she managed to put the book back on the table beside her with the pencil inside the cover, propping it open.

And so, very soon, in bitterness of spirit and great bewilderment, grieving for her inadequacy and her failure to find Roger's heart, passing from consciousness in pain, in anger, in despair, and in mortal fear, she died.

CHAPTER XXI

ROGER WAS up early the next morning, and hearing the postman's ring while Mrs. Hedges was still cooking his breakfast, he collected the letters and newspapers himself, calling to her not to bother to leave the kitchen. He found in the box a couple of advertising circulars, a mission pamphlet, a postcard from Jim Bathurst saying he was called back to Cambridge unexpectedly to help entertain some visiting scientists from abroad, and a letter from Kay Lawson. He put the whole bunch down on the table beside his place, with Kay's at the bottom of the heap. Mrs. Hedges brought in the meal while he was standing at the window looking out. She took her Daily Graphic away with her. As Roger sat down he noticed that she had disarranged the letters so that Kay's envelope lay exposed at a little distance from the rest.

"Nosey old bitch," he thought, smiling to himself.

He read Jim's postcard, remembering their conversation of the evening before. What had he said to Jim? It had been rather good. "It is just as easy to fall out of love as it is to fall into it." He caught sight of Kay's letter as he put Jim's card down, and a shadow of annoyance crossed his face. She always seemed to spoil his best effects. He looked at the pamphlet and the circulars, but left the letter unopened. Serve her right. She could wait.

Mrs. Hedges' precipitate entry made him start. His house-keeper looked very strange. She was breathless, a little blue about the lips, and she waved her newspaper jerkily.

"Oh, sir!" she gasped. "Do you think it's true?"

Roger looked at her.

"What is it, Mrs. Hedges?"

"Doesn't it put it in yours, sir? No. I expect not. It was such a shock seeing the name! There can't be any mistake, can there?"

A sharp sense of disaster came upon Roger. He sat upright in his chair, holding out a hand to Mrs. Hedges.

"Is it something you have found in your paper? Show me."

"There!" said Mrs. Hedges, putting her newspaper in front of him and pointing to a small paragraph headed in large capitals, "Young Nurse takes own Life—for Grief?"

Roger's face whitened, and he gripped the edge of the table with both hands. His reluctant eyes followed the small print of the paragraph.

"... body of Katherine Lawson, aged twenty-eight . . . had been dead some hours . . . overdose of sleeping tablets . . . message attributed no blame to anyone living. Dr. Mathers, physician to the hospital, said the dead girl had lost her fiancé in the late war and he thought this must have preyed on her mind."

When he had finished reading Roger looked up. Mrs. Hedges' eyes bored into his. For a long time they stared without moving, while Roger swiftly drove back the forces of shock, disgust and grief, summoning all his reserves of courage and quick wits. The letter from Kay lay on the table at his side; he saw Mrs. Hedges' eyes slip sideways to it and return. He put a hand up to his forehead.

"How appalling!" he said, in a low controlled voice. "I have been worried about her, you know."

"You did say, sir. Not that I noticed anything myself."

"Did I?"

He was glad she remembered so easily at his prompting. He uncovered his face to stretch out a hand to the letter.

Mrs. Hedges watched with bright expectant eyes that were reddened by her easy tears.

"This is a letter from Miss Lawson," he said slowly. It was important to preserve the convention that Mrs. Hedges paid no attention to his mail. "I was just going to open it. I had better give it to the coroner as it is."

He put it into the pocket of his coat, keeping his hand on it there. He heard Mrs. Hedges' little indrawn sigh of disappointment.

"At any rate I shall have to give it to the coroner," he went on. "I expect it is about her novel, but it might give some clue to her state of mind. She must have written it yesterday or the day before." He forced himself to draw it from his pocket again. "It was posted last night."

"Just before she took her life!" said Mrs. Hedges dramatically.

Again they stared at one another and again Mrs. Hedges suffered defeat. She could see he was upset; his eyes looked quite black, his face was so pale. But he wasn't going to give anything away, not he.

"I hope you'll excuse my bursting in here like this," she said, beginning to feel nervous. "I didn't rightly know what I was doing."

Roger handed her back her newspaper. He must not stop her talking, but he longed for her to go, to be alone.

"It was seeing the name. Sort of jumped out at me. Miss Katherine Lawson, student nurse . . ."

"Kathleen," murmured Roger.

"Pardon?"

"Her name was Kathleen."

"The papers always get things wrong. You don't think it could be a mistake? Not our Miss Lawson at all?"

Roger's heart was wrung by her use of the word "our". He began to know at that moment what Kay's loss would mean to him. But he saw Mrs. Hedges' greedy eyes fixed on

the pocket of his coat and understood her veiled suggestion. She wanted him to open the letter and read it out to her.

"I'm afraid that is not very likely. They have got the surname right and the address and the age. In a case like this they would get their information from the police or the hospital authorities. The coroner's officer, who is a plain-clothes policeman, will be making the arrangements for the inquest under the direction of the coroner."

It all sounded very pat, very efficient. He wondered what Mrs. Hedges would say if he told her how he came to know so much about the legal procedure in cases of suicide.

"It's a dreadful, dreadful thing," said Mrs. Hedges, becoming wholly human at the thought of an inquest. "A dreadful, sad, 'orrible thing. Poor young lady! There's no telling what broken 'earts will lead to. She must have kept it to herself. Brooding, like. The war has a lot to answer for that we won't see the end of for years, most likely."

With this solemn reflection Mrs. Hedges saw an opportunity to escape from the room and took it. Roger's silence had begun to terrify her.

When she was gone he got up from the table and went to the window. He had to read Kay's letter. That was the punishment she quite rightly exacted, having imposed so much greater a one upon herself. But he had to summon all his resolution to take the letter from his pocket and to tear open the envelope. He unfolded it slowly, noticing that there were four sheets written upon one side only, and that it bore the date, but no address. It began without prefix and ended without signature. He turned to the beginning, thrust his free hand into the folds of the window curtain to give him support, and read:—

"This is the last thing I shall write, and I am sending it to you because you are the only person who has ever taken a serious interest in my writing. The novel has failed and I am going to destroy it. I shall take it to the hospital

furnace when old Barnes, the night watchman, is out of the way, and put it in the fire.

"I am very tired. I stole some tablets in the dispensary this afternoon. It will be the best way. My hospital work is getting very bad. I have been making serious mistakes in the ward and I am afraid of doing something worse. I have had terrible headaches. I cannot endure any more.

"This is the last time I shall be a nuisance to you, because by the time you get it I shall have gone for ever. I have tried to go away from you over and over again in this world, but whatever I try to do, I fail. Sometimes I go back to you, and sometimes you reach out for me. It is not possible to keep away from you and stay alive. It is love, the kind of love that is greater than any other emotion, that demands fulfilment, fusion, loss of self in the beloved. I have no affection for you now, and no admiration; no veneration, no pity, no solicitude. I love you utterly, and you stand on the other side of an unbridgeable chasm. It is a terrible, a fearful thing. There is no escape from it except through death.

"I do not want to die. I want to live. But I must escape. If you had done this on purpose, out of conscious wickedness, I think I should have been revolted by your deliberate evil, and from sheer horror I might have dragged myself free. If you had deceived me and pretended a love you did not feel and seduced me for a passing pleasure, I should not have been wholly frustrated, and my pride would have been stung to resistance in the end, because I know that I have always looked for good and not evil, and admired good and not evil ways.

"But you did none of these things. You are innocent. I have made you suffer, though not as you have made me suffer. You intended no evil at any time. You are innocent, and that has broken my heart.

"I will destroy the novel and my diary and all your letters. There is nothing to connect my death with you. You will destroy this letter. Thank you for the perfect happiness of Springstead. May God protect you."

As Roger came to the end of this letter the hand that held it dropped to his side and he began to stumble to and fro across his room gripped by a fiercer pain than any he had suffered before in the whole course of his life. His pain was a screaming protest against the essential structure of human nature, his own and Kay's; against all civilisation's licensed rules of conduct, against all the stronger instincts of the primitive state. Human beings, perpetually preying, and preyed upon by one another, appalled him. And through the maze of terrible images that marched across his vision Kay appeared and reappeared, a pale lonely ghost, holding out defeated hands to him, accusing no one but herself, and as deadly to him in her loving mercy as he had been unsparing in his truthful indifference to her. In his despair and abasement he determined to go at once to the coroner, to expose himself, to bring about a material visible ruin to match the devastation within. He would point to that other time, forgotten except by a very few who had lived through it in his company, when another life had been laid down on his account, another blood sacrifice flung in his path to trip him up. Let him appear a monster, let him be cast out, let people forever shrink from him, so that this nightmare should not happen again for a third time and crush him utterly.

Finding himself swaying beside his desk, beating it with the hand that still held Kay's letter, he let himself fall into his chair, and leaning both arms on the desk bowed his head on them and sobbed without restraint.

When he was quieter he drew himself up and tried to think. Extremes of grief and terror bring their own prompt relief. He felt empty, but clear-headed. He was able to take

hold of his sorrow, to soothe it, to prepare it for a place in the dungeons of his mind where it could weep unseen and unheard. He would not kill it; he would cherish it there, because in his own fashion, his very special fashion, he had loved Kay, and already he was beginning to be jealous of eternity where she now belonged. So he would never quite free himself of the pangs of grief or jealousy, which are perhaps, after all, the same thing.

Kay's letter still lay under his hand. He separated its four sheets and laid them in series before him. He noted again that she had put the date but not the address at the top of the first page and that the letter began at the left-hand margin without the conventional use of his name, and ended without a signature or form of leave-taking. It began then with her statement, "This is the last thing I shall write . . ." The page ended with the words, "I cannot endure any more."

Roger sighed deeply. Poor Kay. Poor dear. Perhaps she had arranged it like this on purpose. It made everything so easy: dignified, restrained, safe from the vulgarity of the Press. Dr. Mathers' view would be accepted, and if asked, he could uphold it himself. The parents? He was covered by her letter with regard to them too. And with Mrs. Hedges. He sighed again, his eyes once more filling with tears.

Folding up the last three pages of Kay's letter he put them in his wallet behind Vic Stevens' newest account of himself. Later, that evening perhaps, when his fire was lit, he would burn them in such a way that no ash was left to attract Mrs. Hedges' attention. The remaining sheet, the first of the letter, he put back in the envelope. When he felt less shaken he would go out, first to the hospital, and then to the police station nearest to it. Before that he must get in touch with his secretary to cancel his appointments for the morning.

He got up, and again paced the room, but this time with a firm step and a face hardened by resolution. Mrs. Hedges opened the door softly, crept in, removed the traces of his untouched breakfast and retired again, making no noise.

At length Roger stopped in his pacing, halted again by the window through which the morning sun streamed into the room. Below in the street people were hurrying to their work. A man with a barrow load of fruit pushed his way slowly past the houses, crying his wares. Mist cleared from a cloudless sky; the leaves on the trees, the roofs, the pavements, shone golden in the still air. But Roger was not aware of their beauty. He had fled to the inmost shrine of his being, to the god whose word was his own word, whose image was his own image, whose comfort was everlasting.

He was cut off from the living world. With the sunlight falling slantwise upon his closed eyelids, he wore the face of a saint at prayer.

THE END

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